

DESTINIES

GREGORY O. SCOTT

For Tim Zahn

You couldn't,
So I did.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Neev Alsok, scientist (Omwati male)

Dician, scientist (humanoid female)

Harl Dorcan, criminal (human male)

Tenel Ka Djo, Hapan Queen (human female)

K'Kruhk, Jedi Master (Whiphid male)

Talon Karrde, farmer (human male)

Mazzic, smuggler (Myke male)

Ben Skywalker, Jedi apprentice (human male)

Luke Skywalker, Jedi Grand Master (human male)

Mara Jade Skywalker, Jedi Master (human female)

Jacen Solo, Jedi Knight (human male)

Paks Veem, information dealer (Gran male)

PROLOGUE **LOOMINGS**

A long time ago it had been a graceful thing. Its gray wedge-shaped hull, simple and blunt but instantly recognizable, had slid through the stars or dove into the atmospheres of countless worlds. Depending on one's allegiance, the sight of it bursting through cloudy skies meant certain salvation or certain doom. Because it was so simple, stark and powerful, its arrowhead design had been reworked dozens of times since its creation. The ships modeled after it had been bigger, faster, and more powerful, but in the end they were always imitations.

It was a ruin now. It had been almost sixty years since *Pride of Chandrila* crashed onto the planet's surface. The *Acclamator*-class assault carrier's massive hull remained unmoving, wedged between two mountains, its blunted gray nose jutting outward over an escarpment that tumbled down to a deep canyon. Beyond the canyon stretched a broad plain of iron-red dust. The carrier's tall narrow command tower was topped with black-scorched ruin, virtually unchanged since the day a few well-placed missiles had exploded the bridge. Its four engines were vast, empty mouths that had been dark and silent for decades.

The air on the planet was dry, and *Chandrila* had been preserved despite its violent crash and years of

abandonment. The planet's natives had scavenged what there was to scavenge, but that had been long ago. Now all that remained was a lonely, forgotten ghost on a lonely forgotten world.

This world spun slowly on its axis, so that each cycle lasted almost a standard year. The long days became dangerously hot, and the long nights just as cold. What natives the planet had moved perpetually across their world in the violet band of twilight that crept slowly across the northern continents. The weather and worse, the ecological damage wracked during the war, made it almost impossible for proper farming. The natives drifted across their world, hunting strange animals for their food and scavenging from whatever strange plants had adapted themselves to the harsh environment.

It was a cruel and bleak place, but in the narrow band of perpetual twilight, there could be beauty as well.

K'Kruhk sat at the crest of the mountain. He wore thick animal-skin robes to fend off the wind, and beneath the robes he was further protected by rough skin and a coat of long fur, once sandy-brown but now steadily turning gray. He had a massive body, almost three meters high. Each hand ended in three fingers and each finger ended in a thick claw. His face was long and narrow but his mouth was wide, and two tusks jutting from his lower jaw. His eyes were small and dark.

His people came from an icy world almost as harsh as this, and though he'd spent his childhood and young adulthood training to be a Jedi Knight under Master Twoseas on Coruscant and more pleasant worlds across the Republic, he'd found that he could adjust naturally to hostile climates.

In a way, they were even welcome. Sometimes, it felt like he'd come back to a home he could no longer remember.

K'Kruhk had spent over half a century on this planet. For the first years, even the first decades, he'd been afraid that somehow the Emperor's men would track him to this desolate, forgotten place. As time went by, he came to understand that no one would come for him, and if he wanted, he could remain here for the rest of a life very long by human standards.

It was a tempting thought. The horrors of the Clone Wars, and the even greater horrors of the great Purge that followed, had filled him with bitterness and disillusion that could easily grow into the dark side. Even before the rest of the Jedi had been exterminated, he had pondered putting down his lightsaber and walking away from the Order, even the Force itself, for he had been taught that a Jedi made peace, and as a Knight and later Master, all he'd known was war.

This planet was not just a place of exile. He had a purpose here, too. The natives, a nomadic tribal people, needed help to survive on a world, already harsh, now ravaged by ecological disaster. They'd greeted K'Kruhk with a godlike reverence, for he was three times their size and capable of magic through both the Force and simple technology.

So he was their guide, and their protector. Sometimes they made him feel like he wasn't alone, but only sometimes.

His clan was down in the valley now. K'Kruhk had climbed up the mountain of his own will, mostly to see if his old body could still do it. Now he sat on a peak from which he could see the long string of mountains running from north to south, violet in the long twilight. To the east he saw the iron-red wastes, tinted deeper red by the hint of oncoming day. To the west, higher mountains rose dark against a darker night.

But he found his attention drawn to *Chandрила*, which lay stuck between two mountains a kilometer to the

north. He had not been inside the vessel for years. Though he'd never served on it himself, he'd spent the worst years of his life on assault ships just like it. Despite his conscious aversion, he felt himself being drawn to it, and was not sure why.

He thought it might have been the Force talking to him.

He still used the Force for tricks, yes. Little thing that helped him and his clan survive in a hostile environment. It had been decades since he'd ever felt any attachment to the greater universe. Sometimes, during the war and during his flight, he'd almost felt that the galaxy itself was speaking to him, whispering wordless wisdom that kept him alive when everyone else he'd ever known or cared about was killed. Some Jedi talked about the Force having a will, almost like a consciousness, and for a time he'd believed it. Since he'd settled on this world, the Force had stopped speaking to him. He'd started to doubt whether it ever had.

Now, though, it was back. Perhaps. Perhaps he was going mad or getting old. Or, just possibly, the Force was telling him that something was going to change soon, that over sixty years of quiet exile were coming to an end.

He shifted on the mountaintop, turning away from *Chandrila* to face the other ruin lying some two kilometers to the south.

He'd never known that the name of the wrecked Trade Federation ship was. During the war the massive *Lucrehulk*-class control ships had been almost as iconic as *Acclamator*-class cruisers, with their near-complete circular hulls and spherical central control station. Now the ship was as sorry as proud *Chandrila*. One semi-circular arm of the ship was smashed against a mountainside. The other half-hung off a ledge. Its command sphere, protected by the round arms, had

survived the crash relatively unscathed, so it had that advantage over *Chandрила*. The cruiser looked like it could tip over at any moment and plunge into the black crevasse that separated the twilit mountain range with the higher ones in the dark west.

K'Kruhk stared at it. He thought, just maybe, he saw a few pinpoints of light on the command sphere, as though someone were inside. As though it were alive again after so many years.

It could have been a trick of the twilight. It could have been madness, or age. Or the Force really could be talking to him after all this time, telling him that something was finally going to change.

PART I
GENERATIONS

CHAPTER ONE

When the sun went down on Galactic City, everything changed. First shadows fell from the sides of skyscrapers and flooded the lower levels with darkness even when the sky still glowed. As the lower levels fell into darkness their lights turned on even while the sky was still bright high overhead. Lamp-glow climbed up from the lower levels floor-by-floor while the sun dipped below the horizon so that when the last light left the tips of the high skyscrapers the lower and middle storeys of the same buildings were plunged already deep into night.

By the time the tops of the highest buildings turned on their lights, the nightlife in the lower levels was already going strong. They said there were parts of Galactic City where the party went on for twenty standard hours of the day, and the only break came in the four midday hours when the sun shone straight through the artificial canyons and bleached the pleasure district dry.

One of those twenty-hour places was the Mynock's Roost. It occupied three storeys and had broad balconies that jutted out into one of those duracrete canyons, making it a popular spot for a variety of beings looking for a long enjoyable night. It was too deep into the lower levels to give a good view of the skyscraper peaks, but you could still watch the speeders cut through the narrow lanes and admire the flashing multi-color lights

of the establishments that lined the so-called Windlash Alley.

Ben Skywalker was pretty sure he was the only twelve-year-old in the Mynock's Roost that evening, or at least the only twelve-year-old human. He loved that fact because it made him feel mature, but it also made him feel conspicuous. Being conspicuous was one of the things he hated (and it was tragically hard to avoid when you were the son of the most famous being in the whole galaxy) but that was why he was huddled in the shadowy back corner of the booth with a hood pulled over his head.

Jacen Solo wasn't huddled in the shadows and he didn't wear a hood. He was dressed in simple black trouser-and-vest combination and he was chatting pleasantly with the Twi'lek waitress. When the order was finished, the waitress sauntered off to another table. Ben couldn't help but admire the rich green tone of her skin, and the waitress outfits here certainly left skin to admire.

"Something on your mind, Ben?" Jacen asked.

Ben jerked his attention to his cousin. "No. Not at all."

Jacen chuckled softly. "Keep your eye on the prize, Ben. A Jedi can't let himself get distracted by anything."

"I wasn't distracted."

Jacen raised an eyebrow.

Ben sighed and crossed his arms over his chest. It wasn't his fault that Jacen dragged him to a place like this. Of course, Jacen wasn't distracted at all. Jacen *never* seemed to look at girls, which Ben found strange but also comforting, because it was proof that eventually his hormones would stop tugging him in the direction of any extra skin, green or otherwise.

"What did you get me to drink?" Ben asked.

"Churban brandy and a shot of Rycanthian whiskey," Jacen deadpanned.

"Seriously."

"The house soda."

"Okay. I can handle that."

Jacen leaned back in his seat. "I'm surprised you look so relieved. I thought you enjoy coming to places like this. Most kids your age don't, not even the other Jedi trainees."

Ben knew that was true. Most of the other Jedi apprentices were stuck in the Temple, doing boring things like practicing levitation all day and sleeping in the dorms all night. It was thanks to Jacen that he was out here, seeing the undersides of the galaxy and learning how to put his growing Force skills to practical use.

"Tell me about our target," Ben said.

"I already did. Paks Veem from Malastare, informant extraordinaire. Alliance Intelligence said he's dared stop by Coruscant for a one-night business meeting, and apparently this is his favorite spot in Galactic City. Paks Veem is no ordinary low-level gun-and-drug runner. He sells *information* on guns and drugs, usually stuff stored in secure warehouses in the far corners of the galaxy, which is a lot more valuable."

Ben got that part, but Jacen had pulled him away from dinner with his parents last-minute. Luke and Mara had minded the interruption a lot more than their son, and he didn't look forward to facing them later tonight.

"Why aren't Kalenda's people trying to find him?"

"They are," Jacen tapped the tiny audio transmitter tucked in his ear. Jacen's hair was long enough to hide it unless he tilted his head back. "They'll tell us if he comes our way."

"But why are *we* here?"

"Because Kalenda's people don't have the Force, and our target does."

Ben raised an eyebrow. "You're saying this Paks Veem trained at the Jedi Academy?"

"He was there briefly around the same time I was. I didn't know him well, but I understand he was hard to teach. Very ill-behaved. He didn't seem to have much technical skill either, aside from an ability to sense other people's surface thoughts and emotions, which I guess helps if you're making your career as a crook."

"So he's gone to the dark side or something?"

"Well, the dark side is a slippery concept." Jacen looked like he wanted to say more but didn't want to say anything that would get him in trouble with Ben's father. "From what we've heard, he's no Sith, or anything close. Sith want power to control and dominate things. Paks Veem just wants a quick credit."

"Or a million credits."

"Exactly."

The Twi'lek waitress showed up with a tray hoisted on her shoulder. Ben tried not to stare as she leaned forward and handed him his soda.

Instead of watching her go, he very deliberately looked at Jacen and asked, "So that's the key to not turning Sith? To have low standards?"

Jacen chuckled and sipped his own drink. It was dark and bubbly and whatever it was, it looked like something Ben was way too young for.

Jacen put his glass down and leaned closer to his cousin. "There's a definite loftiness to being a Sith that you don't find in low-lives like Paks Veem. People like our grandfather or Emperor Palpatine were big thinkers. They wanted to totally remake the galaxy and the Force was their only way to achieve that kind of ambitious end."

Ben made a face. "You could say that of the Vong, or a million other nasties."

"You could say that about your father too," Jacen said. "The desire for control isn't *inherently* bad. It depends on what you're trying to control, and for what purpose."

“So what, intent determines the rightness of your actions?”

Jacen got another I-hope-you-don't-tell-your-father-about-this look, but before he could say more his hand shot up and pressed his earpiece.

Time to act inconspicuous. Ben took another sip of his drink and scanned the inside of the Roost. The interior lights were dim, but he could still make out a host of humans and other aliens, from Arkanaians to Zehethbra, scantily-clad servers of various races, even a cluster of Trandoshans in an opposite corner booth. He couldn't spot a single three-eyed Gran, though.

Jacen took his hand away from his ear and drank a big gulp. In a low, casual voice he said, “Target's heading this way.”

“I don't see him,” Ben said. He kept his face pointed toward his cousin but swung his eyes left and right, just like Jacen had taught him.

Jacen didn't respond. They'd picked this booth so that, combined, they could have a full-range view of the bar. Jacen's eyes flicked back and forth as he took another gulp of his drink. Ben saw the light of recognition in them but didn't turn to seek their target.

Keeping the cup close to his mouth, Jacen asked, “Do you have it?”

Ben reached into the pocket of his robe. He drew the small flat disc he'd been keeping there and placed it on the seat next to him. “It's out.”

Jacen kept looking over Ben's shoulder. Ben felt nothing in the Force as the audio recorder jumped into the air and flew high, all the way up to the dark and smoky ceiling.

“He's moving to the booth next to the Trandoshans,” Jacen muttered.

“Do you have the recorder?”

Jacen nodded slightly and took another gulp from his drink. Ben was amazed that his cousin could watch the target, stealthily fly an eavesdropping device around a crowded cantina, *and* enjoy an alcoholic beverage at the same time.

Then Jacen leaned back in the booth and tapped the device at his ear. Ben patiently sipped from his drink and risked a sidelong glance at the booth. Sure enough, in the booth next to the Trandoshans was a Gran. Sitting across from the Gran, leaning forward for conversation, was a thin humanoid with pale blue skin and feathery white hair.

“Omwati?” Ben mouthed.

Jacen nodded and took another casual sip from his drink. He didn't have to tell Ben that he'd slipped the eavesdropping device onto the ceiling over their booth and was listening in to their conversation. Ben was mostly curious as to what an Omwati was doing talking to Paks Veem. Omwati rarely left their home planet, and they had a reputation as a scientific, peaceful race.

Ben didn't ask Jacen to explain what was going on, though he was dying to know. He didn't want to come across as an impatient child. Instead he finished off his soda and leaned back in the shadows of the booth. From the corner of his eye he could see the Omwati and Paks Veem engaging in some animated conversation.

Suddenly the Twi'lek waitress appeared in front of them and asked if they'd like refills for their drinks. Ben nearly shot upright in shock and even Jacen looked a little surprised.

It took Jacen only a moment to compose himself. He smiled politely and said, “I'm fine, thank you.”

“Yeah,” Ben grunted, “Me too.”

The waitress smiled back and went off to another table. When she was out of the way Ben immediately looked at Paks Veem's booth. The two aliens had stopped

talking. Veem's long snout was up in the air and his three eyes were scanning the bar. The Omwati just looked confused.

"Did he feel us in?"

"Quiet," Jacen snapped, and suddenly his presence in the Force winked to nothing. Ben knew he could do that, but it was always disconcerting when he did. Right now he wished he could do the same. He already felt ashamed at letting the waitress surprise him like that, even more for letting that shock register in the Force. The best he could do was sink into the booth's shadow and hope was wasn't noticed.

Jacen's disappearing-act seemed to alert the Gran even more. He said something to the Omwati, who moved to protest, then got to his feet. The Omwati reluctantly stood up too, and both began moving for the exit. Thankfully, Jacen and Ben were closer to the door and had a chance to cut them off or track them, but only if they were fast about it.

"Sithspawn," Jacen said, "They're changing location."

"Can we still track them?"

"It's about to get a lot harder." Jacen stood up. "Come on, with me."

Ben scooted to the edge of the booth and jumped out onto the bar floor-

-right in the path of a Zeltron waitress. She was spun off her feet and her cups sprayed glass and foamy liquid across the floor. Ben felt shock and anger and embarrassment all roll off her in the Force. Then he saw a three-set of eyes staring at him and Jacen with recognition.

"Come *on*, Ben!" Jacen snapped, but the Gran and the Omwati were already running. To Ben's further shock, they weren't running for the door. They were sprinting through a crowded bar right for the big balcony that overlooked Windlash Alley.

A speeder, he thought dumbly. *They must have a speeder.*

Ben burst into a sprint. Pulling on the Force, he threw himself high over the pointy heads of a pair of Togruta dining at their table. Paks Veem had plucked a hold-out blaster and was shooting wildly behind him. Patrons were throwing themselves to the floor and holding arms over their heads, which made Ben's and Jacen's job only a little easier because it made it easier for the *other* guys too.

Ben charged ahead, too fast for Paks Veem to get a good shot at him. Jacen was shouting at him to wait now, but Ben didn't stop. The mission had been blown because of him and he wasn't going to let them get away entirely.

Their quarry got to the balcony first. An open-topped airspeeder pulled up in front of them; some being with a round helmet was at the controls. The Omwati jumped into the back seat first. Paks Veem stood on the edge of the balcony, turned around, and aimed one last shot at his pursuers.

"Down!" Jacen shouted, to Ben or the Gran or everybody else. "Get *down*!"

Ben jumped.

Paks Veem shot, missed.

Ben slammed into the Gran shoulder-first. His blaster flew into the air and was gone. They both spilled across the hard smooth surface of the speeder. Ben grabbed hold of the Gran's arm with one hand and used the Force to spin his body around so he had Paks Veem pinned to the speeder's back with both knees.

Then the vehicle shot forward.

Ben lost balance and tumbled backward. He let out a short cry, lost even to his own ears as the wind rushed past his face. He was facing the starless night sky, and the speeder's rear lights were shrinking before him. He

was falling, falling. He tried to pull on the Force to arrest himself but nothing responded.

For a long horrible second, Ben Skywalker was certain he was about to die.

Then he felt himself slow, like somebody was trying to pull him back up to the sky from which he'd fallen. The wind rushed by as he jerked to one side. He was still falling. His body slammed into something, hard. He felt horrible pain shoot up from right leg and was sure he heard something crack.

Then he blacked out.

A second later he was awake again. He was lying on some dirty pavement, staring up at the luminous walls of Windlash Alley. A small crowd of beings had gathered to gawk at the twelve-year-old boy who'd fallen from the sky, but none of them ventured close enough to touch him.

Then Jacen burst through the crowd. He skidded to a halt right in front of Ben. When he met the boy's eyes the panic in his face melted away.

"Sorry," Ben groaned. "Let them go."

Jacen bent on one knee over his cousin and pressed a hand against his cheek. "It doesn't matter, Ben. You're safe, that's what important."

"Am I... okay?"

Jacen didn't answer at first. Not a good sign. Ben squeezed his eyes shut and asked, "I broke my leg, didn't I?"

"I'm sorry, Ben, I think you did."

"Oh," he groaned, "Dad is gonna *kill* me."

"Don't be silly, Ben. He's going to kill both of us."

CHAPTER TWO

Not for the first time, Jacen was impressed by how well his cousin was handling himself. The boy was currently stuck in the ambulatory ward of the Jan Dodonna Memorial Hospital, propped up in his white bed with a clunky bacta cast encasing his entire right leg, waiting for the doctors to come back and deliver a prognosis on how long it would take for his bones to mend a multi-part fracture. Nonetheless, the boy was acting in good cheer, chatting with the nurse as she arranged his pillow and asking about the facilities for exercise and entertainment, like he was in here for vacation instead of rehabilitation.

Beneath the cheery front, Jacen could feel Ben's anxiety in the Force. He was worried about his double-fracture, yes, but more than that (*much* more than that) he was dreading how his parents would react when they arrived.

Jacen knew the feeling. He wasn't looking forward to it either, and for pretty similar reasons.

When Luke and Mara did show up, they weren't upset. Relief poured off them in the Force and was writ plain on their faces. Mara went straight to her son, bent over, and wrapped both arms around him. Luke patted him on the shoulder and asked if he was okay.

Once they ascertained that, yes, Ben was just fine (barring the double-fracture) they turned their attention

to Jacen, who stayed where he was, sitting patiently in the corner of the hospital room next to a window that looked out on the first hints of dawn.

He held up both hands to ward off their accusations and said, "I'm sorry this happened. We were chasing a suspect and Ben took a fall."

"It's not Jacen's fault," Ben protested. "It's *mine*. I'm the one who screwed up. I tried to jump the guy when he was on a moving speeder. If it wasn't for Jacen I'd be a pancake in the Lower Levels somewhere."

Luke's face was still severe. "Where did you take him?"

"The Mynock's Roost," Jacen said plainly. "By Windlash Alley."

Luke's jaw dropped. "You took a twelve-year-old boy *there*?"

Mara put a hand on her husband's shoulder. "What were you two doing there, Jacen?"

"We were helping Kalenda's Intel people," Jacen said calmly. "They were tracking a Force-using information dealer named Paks Veem."

A frown settled on Luke's face. "He was at the Academy for a short while."

"Around the same time I was," Jacen nodded. "I didn't know him very well. I barely remembered when Kalenda mentioned him."

Mara looked at her husband. "You teach him much, Skywalker?"

"Very little. He received some direct tutelage under Dorsk 82," Luke said, naming the Khommite clone Jedi who had been killed during the Yuuzhan Vong War. "From what I was told, he was very impatient, and didn't have a strong natural aptitude. He dropped out after a few months, which was unfortunate, but some beings simply aren't meant to be Jedi even if they do have the Force."

"Well, apparently he's taken to a life of petty crime," said Jacen, "Though not so petty it hasn't drawn the attention of Alliance Intel."

"They contacted you directly?" Luke crossed his arms over his chest.

"It isn't the first time." He added in defense, "I'm sorry, Master Luke, but I thought it was easier this way. I can tell them to process every request through you personally from now on."

Luke sighed. "This isn't about chain-of-command issues, Jacen. Why did you think it was a good idea to take Ben to chase down gangsters in Windlash Alley?" His expression darkened. "Have you done this before?"

"Dad, we haven't," Ben said. "And it was *my* idea. I *wanted* to come on this mission."

That wasn't exactly true; Jacen had, in fact, pulled Ben away from dinner with his parents because he thought the boy could use new training, and because he knew Ben didn't like dinner with his parents anyway. Right now Ben was saying so half to cover for Jacen, and half because the boy hated the idea of other people making decisions for him. He wanted Luke to treat him like an adult, which was something the Grand Master of the Jedi Order still couldn't get through his head.

Mara, at least, was understanding. Her adolescence had been very different from Luke's peaceful farmboy upbringing. Understanding didn't mean approval, though, and instead of defending her nephew, she crossed her arms under her breasts and said, "Jacen, we know that you like having the freedom to operate outside the rules we hold other Jedi to. You have to understand that's your privilege, not your right."

"I understand," Jacen said, and wondered if they were really going to make him clear every job with them.

"Next time you want to take Ben on a mission," she said, "You're going to clear it with *us* first."

Jacen nodded, accepting. At least they weren't putting him in shackles, only his cousin. "I understand. I'm sorry. This won't happen again."

Luke blew out a long breath. Some of the tension drained from his face. He looked back at Ben and asked, "Did you at least get your target?"

Ben shook his head. "No. I tipped him off. I think he read me through the Force. It was my fault, Dad. If I hadn't screwed up Jacen would have nailed them."

"Maybe," Jacen said. "We had no idea they had a get-away speeder waiting for them."

"Next time we'll get them," Ben scowled. He looked much older than twelve years.

"Assuming there is a next time," Luke said.

"We recorded some conversation in the bar. Kalenda's people are going over it now," Jacen said. "With your permission, Master Luke, I'd like to continue helping them."

"Me too," Ben piped.

Luke shook his head. "Ben, you're in no position to go running around right now. And as for you, Jacen..."

His voice trailed off. Jacen felt something come off him in the Force; not frustration or anger, but a new sense of deep concern.

"Just before we left, we got a message," Luke said. "It's why we were late getting here."

Jacen sat straight in his chair. "What kind of message?"

"It's from the Queen of Hapes," Mara said.

Jacen tried to keep his shock from his face, and from the Force. "What did Tenel Ka have to say?"

"She wants you to come to Hapes. Immediately."

Jacen's mouth went dry. Over the past three years he'd snuck in occasional visits to Hapes to see Tenel Ka and Allana, the daughter they'd sired together. Those trips were always too brief and too far between. He'd never

told anyone about their relationship, not his parents, not Luke and Mara, not even his twin sister Jaina. He'd kept Tenel Ka's secret not just because of the convoluted and dangerous world of Hapan politics, where any princess of the Jedi parentage would be immediately imperiled, but because of the vision the Force had sent him a long time ago during his journeys among the Mind Walkers in the maw. His vision in the Pool of Knowledge had shown him that his fate would be tied, inextricably and painfully, to Allana's. He didn't know how yet, and he desperately wanted to protect others from that pain, especially Tenel Ka and Allana herself.

He tried to keep his face as blank as possible as he asked, "Did she say why?"

Mara shook her head. "She said she had an urgent problem only you could solve."

"I see." Jacen pressed his lips into a flat line. He reached out into the Force, desperate for some sign that Allana might be in danger, but found nothing. He couldn't think of any other reason Tenel Ka might have summoned him so desperately, though the fact that she had gone through the Jedi Temple to relay such a personal request seemed odd.

"You could contact Jaina and Zekk," Luke offered. "They should be on Obroa-Skai now. If you contact them they could get to Hapes before you do."

Jacen hadn't been on good terms with his sister since the Swarm War, and Luke knew it. He was probably suggesting that their mutual friendship with Tenel Ka could bridge the gap that had grown between them. In another situation Jacen might have considered it, but if Allana was in danger, this was his mission to complete alone.

"It's all right," he shook his head. "If Tenel Ka wanted me alone, that's what she'll get. I should probably leave now."

He rose from his chair and resisted the urge to sprint out of the hospital. It was over a day's flight to Hapes and he would be stuck, stewing and helpless, for a long time. He didn't know how he'd manage.

"Good luck, Jacen," Ben said.

"You too." He forced a slanted Solo grin. "I'll tell Kalenda's people to contact *you* once they figure out the next step."

"Me?" Ben's jaw dropped.

"Us," Mara said firmly.

"All right, all three of you," Jacen nodded. "I'll comm them on my way to the spaceport."

Looking excited and trying not to show it, Ben said, "Tell Tenel Ka I said hi."

"I will Ben, don't worry." Jacen walked for the door, stopped on the threshold, and gave Luke and Mara short nods. "May the Force be with you too."

"And you, Jacen," said Luke. "If Tenel Ka needs any more help, Jaina and Zekk will be at Obroa-Skai for three more days."

"Good to know," Jacen said. "Good luck."

It took him five minutes to leave the hospital, two minutes for a taxi shuttle to arrive, and another half hour to get back to his apartment. It took him eight minutes' turnaround time to get his things packed, call the Jedi Temple to get his X-wing prepped, and tell the Intel people to route all updates regarding Paks Veem to Mara Jade Skywalker.

He paused at the communications console in his bedroom, wondering how long it would take him to get to the Jedi Temple. He thought about Jaina on Obroa-Skai, and wondered if he should call her. Despite their differences lately, he knew she'd rush to help Tenel Ka, no questions asked.

But he wasn't ready to reveal Allana to anyone, not yet.

Instead he called up Jaina's apartment on Coruscant. He waited for the message to cycle through her answering service, then listened to his sister's recording recite that she was so sorry she couldn't take his call.

When it was Jacen's turn to leave a message, he momentarily froze, uncertain of what to say. Then he cleared his throat and said, "Jaina, I'm going away for a little while. Tenel Ka needs help with something on Hapes. I'm not sure what."

He paused, then added, "I'll see you later. Love you."

Then he turned off the recorder. He stood for a long second in front of the console, then left the room.

It was already morning when Belindi Kalenda arrived at the Dodonna Memorial Hospital. The small, dark-skinned woman was flanked by a pair of human guards who looked nearly identical and said nothing at all. Kalenda went right up to Ben's hospital room, which struck Mara Jade Skywalker was a welcome touch. It seemed to brighten Ben's mood, which had soured a little since Jacen left.

Mara hadn't worked much with Kalenda since they first met during the Correlion Crisis all those years go, but she had a reputation for quiet efficiency and a dogged attention to detail. She was not known for being particularly outgoing, charismatic, or friendly with her subordinates, which meant her visit was something out of the ordinary.

"We've very sorry you were injured last night, Mister Skywalker," Kalenda began. "Alliance Intelligence will cover all medical expenses."

"Thanks, I appreciate that." Ben seemed a little pleased by being called 'mister.' He leaned forward in his bed and tapped the hard casing of his bacta cast. "The docs say it'll be a little while before I heal right, but the fractures should set and mend."

“An advantage of being young,” Luke stressed the last word.

He was standing on the other side of the bed, near the window that was now bright with morning light. He hadn't said much since Jacen left, but Mara knew how to read him. He was angry at Jacen and Ben both, and at Kalenda too for putting his son at risk, but after all these years Luke still wasn't comfortable with voicing his frustration. There was still a deferent farmboy inside the Jedi Grand Master who didn't like to start arguments and stoke tensions.

Maybe Kalenda sensed this, maybe not. She said to Mara, “I'm sorry Jacen Solo was called away, but he told us to route all communication to you from now on. I'll answer any questions I can about the case.”

Mara nodded. It was no surprise Jacen hadn't made Luke the primary point of contact for this issue; he knew the Grand Master's moods as well as Mara did. More than that, he knew that Mara had more experience with intelligence, subterfuge, and generally shady work than her husband.

She flicked several quick questions through her head, then tried the most important one. “Have you been able to trace the speeder Ben fell from?”

“We pulled security recordings from the bar,” Kalenda nodded. “It was a rented from an agency early yesterday afternoon by a Gran with ID marking him as Melno Teem.”

“Fake IDs are easy,” Mara said. “Could you find out anything else about 'Melno Teem?'”

“We checked with customs. A Melno Teem landed at Manari Spaceport yesterday. He came in on a private ship from Contruum registered as the *Red Ace*. We've already impounded it.”

“Is that how you found out Veem was on planet?” Ben spoke up.

Kalenda shook her head. "Offworld sources tipped us off. We didn't know how he'd come or what alias he'd be using."

"Sloppy of him to use to same fake ID twice," said Mara. "Do you know where he is now?"

"We have no record of Melno Teem or Paks Veem leaving the planet, but that means nothing. He could have snuck out on another ship, or he could be hiding on Coruscant now."

"What about the Omwati?" Ben asked. "They don't leave their home planet that often. Could you get an ID on him?"

Kalenda didn't seem phased at being interrogated by a twelve-year-old. She replied, "We analyzed the audio and the images from the security camera and we believe we might have a match."

"Who?" asked Mara. There was probably a small pool of Omwati on Coruscant to pick from.

"We believe he might be Neev Alsok, a geneticist employed by the xenobiological research institute at Valorum University."

"Have you checked on him?"

Kalenda paused, maybe considering what to reveal. Then she said, "We're putting together a team now."

"What kind of team?"

Another pause. "One group to search his registered apartment, the other to search his workplace."

"I'd like to come."

Kalenda arched an eyebrow. "May I ask why?"

Because her son had nearly been killed chasing down this potential *sleemo* and she didn't want him to get away. It wasn't that she didn't trust Alliance Intel people; right now her son had been hurt, she was angry and restless, and she wanted to make sure things were done right.

But she told Kalenda, "He may have Veem hiding out somewhere. A Force-user would come in handy."

"I see your point," Kalenda admitted. "If so, I can call the team heading for his house and tell them you'll be joining."

"Please."

"I hope you can explain something to me." Luke finally spoke up. "Why is Alliance Intelligence interested in Paks Veem? I'd think he would fall under the jurisdiction of the CSF."

"Local security focuses on Corsucant-based crime," Kalenda said. "We've been watching Veem for quite some time, on Malastare, Ord Mantell, and a half-dozen other planets."

"What specifically do you suspect him of doing?"

Kalenda stared at him and didn't answer. Mara sighed; they were lucky Kalenda had revealed as much as she had.

"Can you tell me where to meet the search team?" she asked Kalenda.

The woman nodded. "I'll tell them to wait for your arrival."

Mara tried to remember the last time she'd broken into someone's apartment, but couldn't. The Emperor had taught her more than a few tricks when it came to breaking and entering. You could try slicing into the locking mechanism on the door, either by brute-forcing through the encryption algorithms or by something more elegant. You could wrench the door open with the Force, but that might damage it permanently. You could kick through a window or neatly slice through it with your lightsaber, but that was also permanent. You could even reach out with the Force, find a suitably weak mind inside the room, and get that person to open the door for you. The Emperor himself had seemed fondest of the

last method; he'd always loved anything that gave him the chance to control other people.

The Emperor was a long time dead, and Mara no longer regretted that. At the moment, though, she was starting to regret that some of the tricks he'd taught her had slipped from her memory. It wasn't just because the years since the Swarm War had been pretty peaceful; ever since a certain blonde-haired blue-eyed farmboy-turned-Jedi walked into her life, her subterfuge skills had been steadily going rusty.

It wasn't something she minded, normally, but right now she really wished she remembered how to slice open a triple-encrypted lock.

Neev Alsok's apartment was located inside a high-class apartment tower a few kilometers away from Valorum University. The entry hallway had scarlet walls and carpets with elaborate gold patterns. Mara knew there was good money to be made in bio-engineering nowadays, but the best money usually flowed through private employers, not state-funded research institutes. As she stood to one side of the door, back pressed against the wall, she wondered whether Alsok might have been selling his expertise on the side. It would certainly explain why he'd been meeting with Paks Veem.

There were two other Intelligence people with her. A young human woman named Remy was crouched close to the doorframe, trying to slice into the locking mechanism, while a reedy, furry Frozian named Malbek stood on the other side of the doorway with a blaster pistol clutched between both paws.

Remy's face was locked in a scowl. In a whisper she said, "I'd bet anything this lock didn't come with the room. He must have installed his own."

"If this doesn't work, we can try the window," Mara said.

"I'd rather go through the front door," Malbek said. "I'm not a Jedi. I can't go flying through the air."

"I think I can slice it," Remy said, "I just wonder what *else* he's installed. Security alarms, traps, who knows."

"You're sure nobody's inside?" Malbek fixed his big black eyes on Mara.

She nodded. "I don't feel anybody."

"Well, let's just hope he's not renting the place to some Vong," said Remy. She blew out a breath and stood up. "Okay, I think I broke through the lock. Who wants to do the honors?"

"I'll go first," Mara said. Remy moved aside to let Mara stand in front of the door. Remy pulled out her own pistol and stood to the side, weapon raised. Mara reached out with the Force one last time, just to make sure nobody was inside. Then she pressed the button beneath the lock.

The door hissed open. Mara stared down a long, dim entry hallway toward a living room lit softly by midday sun. She held up one hand to keep Malbek and Remy back and stepped carefully down the hall. Her boots pressed soundlessly on a soft cream-colored carpet. She didn't see any security cameras tucked above the doorframe, nor any tiny sensor nodes drilled into the hallway's smooth blank walls.

The living room was a broad and shallow arc, with the same cream-colored carpet and floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out on a busy Coruscant skyline. The tables and shelves were adorned with a variety of art objects, mostly abstract sculptures made of metals or carved wood. Mara wasn't an art expert, but they looked to be from a variety of different cultures.

Alsok was making money somehow, there was no doubt about that.

She checked out one room after another: kitchen, bedroom, bathroom, study. All looked neat and upscale

but otherwise fairly unremarkable. When she was sure there were no alarms and booby traps, she called Malbek and Remy in with a single sharp whistle. The two agents stepped inside, closing the door behind them.

"Huh," Malbek grunted, "Wish I had this guy's salary."

"Everything looks in order," Mara said, "Except for his bedroom. I saw a few drawers ajar, plus some clothes on the floor."

"Like he was in a hurry to get out last night," Remy said.

"It sounds likely."

"Definitely. I was able to read the entry/exit logs on the door. Last use was twelve hours ago."

Not long after Ben took his fall, then. "Have we heard anything from the University? I'd bet anything Alsok didn't come to work this morning."

"I wouldn't take that bet," Malbek fished out his comlink. "If you'll excuse me for a second, I'll make a call."

The Frozian wandered into the kitchen, leaving Mara and Remy to survey the sunlit living room. Remy stuffed her pistol into its hip holster, and Mara remembered the lightsaber she was still holding in her hand. She clipped it to her belt and her palm felt empty. Alsok and Veem were clearly nowhere near the apartment, but she still felt on edge. Her only son having a brush with death was probably the cause of that.

Remy might have sensed that. She said, "I'm sorry about your son. Is he going to be okay?"

"He'll be fine in a week or two," Mara nodded. "Thanks for asking."

"Malbek and I were part of the team that was watching the cantina last night." She placed hands on

her hips. "We should have spotted that get-away speeder. We screwed up. I'm sorry about that."

"It's all right," Mara said. A question popped into her mind, one she probably didn't want the answer to, but she asked anyway, as casually as she could. "Have you done missions with Ben and Jacen before?"

"A few with Jacen. He's really useful." A smile slanted on her face. "I wish we had a few in-house Jedi, but a loaner works in a pinch."

"What about Ben?"

"First time for me," she said, which could always mean that Jacen had taken Ben on *other* risky missions.

Malbek walked back in from the kitchen. He stuffed his comlink into his pocket and said, "You guessed right. Alsok didn't show up for work today. We've got a team combing over his materials in the university lab, for whatever that's worth."

"I doubt he left his side work lying around the office," Mara said. "Let's search through here. If he and Veem were in a hurry last night, they might have missed something."

The three of them spent the next half-hour pulling open every drawer, peeking beneath every table and chair, even spilling out the entire contents of his kitchen. Mara noted it was well-stocked, which meant Alsok probably hadn't been expecting to go on the run anytime soon. A man who lived in this kind of material wealth probably didn't expect to go running at all. Mara took some small comfort from the knowledge that Alsok was probably having a major stress attack right now.

Remy was able to find a handful of datacards in his bathroom, of all places. They were encrypted on a level she couldn't break through, at least not without some extra tools. As they were preparing to pack up and head back to Intel headquarters, Malbek got another call. He didn't step aside that time, just held the comlink to his

furry ear, nodded three times, scowled, and turned it off again.

"Who was that?" Remy asked when he didn't volunteer information right away.

"CSF gave us a tip. Somebody busted a ship from the Calumar Spaceport early this morning. Hyperdrive-capable YT-something-model. Somebody sabotaged the sensors so they could slip out without tripping the alarm. Security cams show a Gran, an Omwati, and a human got into it right before it took out."

"Damn," Mara scowled. "Do we have any idea where they went?"

"Orbital traffic control cleared them for a jump onto the Perlemian, but they could have changed course anywhere."

"At least we have these," Remy tapped the datacards.

"Assuming you can decrypt them," Mara said.

"We can decrypt anything," Remy said defensively.

"Can you now?" Mara raised an eyebrow.

"Well, not me, personally," Remy admitted. "But we've got the best slicer in the galaxy, bar none. This is the guy who cracked Thrawn's codes way back in the day."

A memory and a smile came to Mara unbidden. "Shame on me for forgetting," she said. "I know just who you're talking about."

"You do?" Malbek asked.

"Yep," Mara nodded. "I used to work with him. Way back in the day."

It had been almost twenty years since Mara first met Ghent, and it seemed like he'd barely changed. He still had the same pasty-white skin and diamond-shaped blue tattoos on his forehead. He still had a long, unruly mess of blue-green hair. He still possessed a certain unaware and boyish quality that made him seem younger than he

was. And of course, he was still the best slicer she had ever met.

They had gathered around his console in Intel headquarters to watch him work: Mara, Malbek, Remy, and Director Kalenda herself. They all hovered behind his shoulder, watching his console in reverential silence as Ghent's fingers danced across the keyboard and his screen flashed with data readings and complicated script that Mara could have barely followed on her best days.

In the end, it only took Ghent about a half hour. When he was done he took his hands off the keyboard, leaned back, and stretched out both arms. One hand knocked Malbek in the side and Ghent jerked upright, surprised, like he'd just noticed they were there.

He took all four of them in with one sweep of the eyes, blinked, and said, "Well, I've got it."

"What is it you have?" Kalenda asked, hands on her hips.

"Well, we've got three discs here, and I've sliced all of them." Ghent slouched lazily in his seat. Whereas the other Intel people wore crisp dark-gray uniforms, Ghent wore the same type of baggy, oversized clothes he always had. Combined with the slouch and messy hair, it made him look like a perpetual insouciant teenager.

"What's on them?" Mara pressed. "Communications records? Money?"

"Well, the first two were scientific data," Ghent scratched his cheek. "Mostly stuff on genetics. That's not my field, but it looked like he was researching stuff on cloning."

Mara and Kalenda exchanged serious looks. Cloning was carefully regulated under Alliance law. Currently the practice had been banned for private corporations, and was only allowed for select worlds like Arkania that had a long history in the science.

"What was the third one?" asked Remy.

"*That* was the fun one," Ghent grinned. "Really well-encrypted. Like, layer on layer on layer. Different methods for different subfolders. Very elaborate. Not that I couldn't hand 'em, though."

"What did you find, Ghent?" Mara asked, a little impatient.

"Money trail." Ghent rubbed thumb and forefinger together. "This guy's been routing credits through all kinds of fake accounts. He's been doing it for years, too. It looks like he's been taking on a lot of jobs under the table."

"We could tell that from his apartment," said Remy. "Can you trace where the money's been coming from?"

"Maybe. Money laundering isn't really my area either, but somebody else might be able to trace his accounts."

"We'll get the right people on it," Kalenda nodded. "Thank you, Ghent."

"Any time, Director," the man grinned. "This was a fun one. Alsok must be a pretty good slicer himself."

"He is a smart one, no doubt about that," Kalenda said. "His colleagues at the university all say he's the department's best researcher."

"Did they know about his penthouse suite?" Mara asked.

"They all described him as brilliant, but less than social. Rarely went out with other beings from the department."

"If he was running side jobs, he probably didn't have the time," Malbek suggested.

"Very likely," Kalenda held out a hand. "The discs, Ghent?"

"Oh, sure." Ghent's fingers flashed across his keyboard again, and the last data disc ejected into his palm. He scooped up the other two and gave them to Kalenda.

"We'll get the right people on these right away," the director said. "Master Skywalker, thank you for your service. I'll be in touch if we need anything else."

"Is that it?" Mara didn't want to sound critical, so she chose her words carefully. "From what I can tell, tracing Alsok's accounts only gets proof of a crime. We can't try him, or stop whatever he and Veem are up to, unless we actually capture them."

"We've contacted our people in the field. They're on the lookout."

"It's a big galaxy. *Really* big. We're more than willing to help you finish what we started, Director Kalenda."

The woman regarded Mara wordlessly. Finally, she nodded once. "We will keep you informed, Master Skywalker."

She turned to leave, and with one flicking gesture called Remy and Malbek to follow. The Frozian was right on Kalenda's heels, but Remy paused to give Mara a 'what-can-you-do?' shrug before following them out the door.

It hissed shut behind them and Mara fought back a sigh. Kalenda preferred using her people for Intel duties, which made perfect sense. Mara knew better than to take it personally, but it still felt like a slight. In a way, she'd actually enjoyed sneaking into unknown apartments and tracing criminal activity. It had all been strangely nostalgic.

"How's Ben?" Ghent asked, still slouching in his chair.

Mara looked down at him. Still the same blue eyes and pale face, barely lined. She said, "He's okay. The doctors say his leg will heal fine."

"Did he get hurt?" Ghent's blue eyebrows drew together.

Mara didn't want to get into the whole story, so she said, "He had a fall, but he'll be okay."

"That's good. He's.... how old now?"

"Twelve," she said, and Ghent looked surprised. She could hardly believe it herself.

"I bet he's shooting up fast. Last I saw him, he was..." Ghent paused. "Nine? Ten? I can't remember. Whenever you had me pull those old holos out of your droid."

Mara's throat went dry. Those 'old holos' had shown the awful last meetings between Anakin Skywalker and Padme Amidala. Luke had been horrified at what his father had become, and had only mustered the strength to watch his mother's death after Jacen told him he had to embrace his pain and move beyond it. Jacen had gained a curious and sometimes disturbing fixation on pain, both physical and emotional, since his time under Yuuzhan Vong captivity, but in this instance, Jacen's advice had been just what Luke needed to get past his fears and defeat Lomi Plo to end the Swarm War.

"That was a while ago," Mara said quietly.

"Three years." Ghent stretched again. "You should visit more often, Mara. You Jedi all moved to Coruscant, so we're in the same neighborhood again."

Mara hadn't thought of it that way. The past few years had been busy ones, despite the lack of military or political crises. The Jedi Temple had been rebuilt in the place of the old one and the apparatus of the Jedi Order had largely been moved back to Galactic City, with only the academy remaining on Ossus. The move had been seen by some as an assertion of political power, but to Luke it had been a way of showing that the Jedi Order was strong again and ready to move back into the place the old Order had before the rise of the Empire.

Political power or spiritual continuity, or a little bit of both, it had made for interesting debates, ones which apparently even Ghent had caught wind of.

She looked at that familiar face, that face she hadn't seen in three years, and asked, "Have you talked with Karrde recently?"

"Everyone once in a while," Ghent said. "He's still got his ears to the ground, even if he is kind-of retired."

Shortly after the Swarm War, Karrde had bought some property on bucolic Ukio, of all places. Mara had been incredulous at the thought of her old boss settling down for a farmer's life. She had meant to talk to him in depth about it, maybe even visit him on his homestead, but Jedi Master duty kept chaining her to Coruscant.

She decided, then and there, that it had been far too long. She asked, "Do you know if he's still on Ukio?"

"He was, oh, four months ago, when I last talked to him."

Four months. Mara hadn't seen Karrde face-to-face in almost four *years*. She sighed and said, "Never thought I'd pine for the old days."

Ghent raised those blue eyebrows, confused.

"It's nothing," she waved a hand. "Do you think Karrde would know anything about Paks Veem?"

"Oh, I know he does."

"You *do*?" She stared at Ghent. More than surprised, she felt embarrassed that she'd gotten to far out of the loop.

"Yup," he nodded. "Last time we talked, he complained about some wily Gran stealing some of his old clients."

"I thought Karrde'd gone to pasture."

He raised just one blue brow that time, like he was asking if she really believed that. She didn't, and hadn't wanted to in the first place.

"Thanks for the tip, Ghent." She patted him on the shoulder.

"You're going to pay him a visit, aren't you?"

Mara nodded. She could see old friends she'd neglected, help catch Veem, and take a little family trip with her husband and son. Best of all, she probably

wouldn't have to pull a lightsaber on anyone the entire trip.

All in all, it had the potential for a pretty good vacation.

CHAPTER THREE

The ride to Hapes was an interminably long one. The moment after he jumped to hyperspace he realized he should have found a shuttle to ride instead of the XJ4 X-wing he'd retrieved from the Jedi Temple. In a shuttle at least, he could have paced, exercised, or otherwise found some way to distract himself from the worry eating him from the inside-out.

Stuck as he was in his starfighter's cockpit, he closed his eyes against the blur of hyperspace and tried to find Tenel Ka and Allana in the Force. He was anxious and had a hard time getting properly in tune, but he could still sense something from both Tenel Ka and his daughter. He could feel Tenel Ka's own anxiety, mixed with shock and a surprising rage. If he had been calmer he might have been able to touch her mind, and maybe get a response back, but as it was all he could do was soak in the faint glow of her emotions from halfway across the galaxy. From Allana, all he could sense was confusion. He took strange solace in that; if his daughter was really in mortal danger, he would have been emanating fear as well.

That was what he told himself as infinity kept flashing outside his cockpit. He felt impossibly helpless here, and there was nothing he hated more than that. No matter how strong he'd become in the Force, no matter

what new skills and knowledge he had gained from Vergere and all the various beings he'd met on his five-year wandering across the galaxy, he was nothing he could do to help the people most important to him.

He closed his eyes, waited, tried and failed to sleep. He ran through every kind of Force-based mediation he'd been taught, and nothing could calm him.

When hyperspace finally fell away, and the bright blue-green sphere of Hapes glowed in his cockpit, he didn't feel the relief he'd been expecting. If anything, the tension felt greater.

A sleek Nova cruiser on orbital patrol hailed Jacen and asked his business. He gave the simple truth: he was Jacen Solo, Jedi Knight, here on request from Queen Mother Tenel Ka. Since Tenel Ka had filed her request directly with the Jedi Temple, it meant she wanted the situation, whatever it was, handled via official channels. He didn't have to sneak his way around the Hapan palace. At least, not yet.

The patrol let him pass. As clouds whipped past his cockpit and the oceans of Hapes' northern hemisphere filled his view, he tried once more to reach out to Tenel Ka. Finally, he was close enough to touch her mind, and he felt her respond with warmth and genuine gladness, all her anxiety suddenly melted away. As for Allana, he still felt her confusion, but nothing more. He felt that she was near, probably in the royal palace, which allayed his worries a little more. Whatever the problem was, and he didn't doubt it was dire, their daughter was not in immediate danger.

After he slipped through the briefly-lowered shields, planetary traffic control directed him to one of the landing pads on the north side of the palace. As he got closer he could spot several small figures standing on the edge of the circular platform. Through the Force, he could tell one of them was Tenel Ka.

Normally when he came to visit Tenel Ka he did so secretly, slipping his ship into one of the cavernous docking bays built into the cliff-sides on the south end of the palace. This time Tenel Ka was giving him an official welcome, and it felt strange. He spent so much effort trying to hide his relationship with Tenel Ka, he was sometimes taken aback when Mara, Luke, or his parents asked him casual questions about the woman he'd known since he was fourteen years old. Now he was apparently expected to parade across the landing pad, maybe kneel or genuflect, and exchange public pleasantries like Tenel Ka was just an old friend and nothing more. The entire situation seemed perverse.

After he set his X-wing down he took a moment to compose himself. He popped the cockpit hatch, removed his helmet, straightened his hair, and fetched the small satchel bag he'd stuffed behind the pilot's seat. He clambered down the side of the X-wing, using the Force to gently drop his boots to the platform's surface. Only then did he turn to face the welcoming party.

Tenel Ka stood in the center. She wore a silver-gray uniform of the Hapan Navy, one sleeve pinned at elbow-length to hide the stump of arm Jacen had severed at the elbow during a lightsaber sparring session on Yavin 4, half a lifetime ago. The red braids of her hair hung over her shoulders and down her back. Tenel Ka had her spine stiff and her head tilted slightly in a regal pose, but relief tugged at the edges of her lips. Jacen couldn't help but grin back; during their school days getting her to smile had been his greatest challenge.

With effort, he took his attention away from her and looked at the others in the party. Tenel Ka was flanked on neither side by a tall, red-haired woman wearing the blue-violet uniform of the Hapan security forces. They seemed identical to each other, and there was something in their faces similar to Tenel Ka's. Behind either of

them was another security officer, each with a long-barrel rifle held to her chest.

Very conscious of the onlookers, Jacen stepped up to Tenel Ka, held her cool gray eyes for one second, then dropped to one knee and bowed his head.

"Thank you for inviting me, Queen Mother" he said, "I am honored to be here."

"I am sure you are, Jedi Solo," Tenel Ka said. Her voice was stiff and controlled, betraying neither the relief nor the anxiety that were spilling off her in the Force. "Please, rise. We have much to discuss."

He got to his feet and looked her in the eye, examining her face for hints as to why he'd been summoned. Instead of giving them, Tenel Ka spun on her heel and walked away. Her guards fell in behind her, and with a retrained sigh, Jacen fell in behind them. He reminded himself that if Tenel Ka could put up with this regal pageantry every day, he could manage until they got somewhere private.

He followed the trail of guards down a long pearly-white hallway until they reached a turbolift. The two guards with rifles stayed in the hallway, letting Jacen step inside the lift with Tenel Ka and the twins.

The door slid shut and the lift jerked into motion. He glanced at the two identical women and wondered what to say.

A weary smile returned to Tenel Ka's lips. "Friend Jacen, these are Taryn and Trista Zel. My cousins."

If they were Hapan, it must have been on her father Isolder's side. Jacen forced a polite smile. "I'm pleased to meet you both."

The one on Tenel Ka's right- Trista, apparently- said, "We're glad you could come on short notice."

"Anything for the Queen Mother," Jacen favored her with a soft smile. "We've known each other for a very long time. I hope nothing too serious has happened."

The smile wilted from Tenel Ka's face. "I'm afraid it has. My father has been kidnapped."

"Kidnapped?" Jacen's jaw dropped. He'd known Prince Isolder almost as long as he'd known Tenel Ka, and his parents had known him even longer; in fact, Isolder had very nearly won the heart of Princess Leia Organa, until he'd had his own taken by a warrior woman from Dathomir.

"The Prince's shuttle was intercepted while leaving the Gallinore System," the other twin, Taryn, said. "Unfortunately, we haven't been able to determine the type of craft, or its origin."

Jacen tried to push his emotions aside and focus on this case as he would for any of Kalenda's. "Were there any witnesses? Did you pick up any debris afterward?"

"None of either," Taryn said. "However, we did find residual traces of laserfire at the site."

"And has anyone contacted you? Have they made any demands?"

"We received a message two standard hours ago," Tenel Ka said. "It was heavily encrypted, and relayed through several different communications stations."

"What did it say?"

"They want an exchange." Tenel Ka swallowed. "My father, for a sample of mine and my daughter's DNA. It also specified a place and time for the exchange."

Jacen's hands balled to fists at his side. It was common knowledge in the Hapan court that Tenel Ka had a daughter whom the public could never view. It had spawned endless rumor and gossip amongst the nobles, and in a way it was only surprising that this hadn't happened sooner.

A sullen silence settled over the lift. Jacen saw the weariness in Tenel Ka's eyes and ached to put his arms around her, but all he could allow was, "I'm very sorry, Your Majesty."

"As am I," Tenel Ka nodded curtly. "However, we must keep moving forward. There are still avenues of investigation to pursue?"

"Such as?"

The turbolift shuddered to a halt. They'd been riding for so long Jacen had no idea where in the bowels of the palace it had carried them. The door opened the the Zel sisters led them down another pearly-white hallway identical to the one they'd left.

As she walked, Trista said, "Only a handful of people knew the location of Prince Isolder's shuttle. We moved quickly to detain them and their family members. We also began a cross-check of transmissions to and from all of their houses. We've narrowed the selection down to a half-dozen who we believed must have been connected to the kidnapping."

"Have you announced the kidnapping yet?"

"Not yet," Tenel Ka shook her head. "Those who ask are told my father's mission to Gallinore has been delayed several days. Several more days, however, will make people suspicious."

"Arresting nobles probably did that already," Jacen said.

"Fact. That is why we would like your help in solving this as quickly as possible."

"So you want me to do what exactly? Pry into people's minds?" The thought made him queasy. Even Alliance Intel and CSF had never had him interrogate prisoners, as they rightly held that Jedi-coerced confessions would be dismissed in court.

Still, he knew how to reach into people's minds. He'd done it before, when Tenel Ka's grandmother had attempted to kill Allana. He'd torn into the wretched old woman's mind, found her intentions, then triggered an embolism that had dropped the witch into the state of permanent catatonia in which had lingered for two years

before succumbing to a death she'd long deserved. It had been an ugly thing to do, something he would never have even considered doing when he was younger, but Allana's life had been at stake. He hadn't regretted it for a minute.

He took a deep breath and said, "I can try. Your Majesty, have you attempted any... interrogations?"

"My skills were never in that area, friend Jacen."

Jacen frowned. He couldn't say no to her request, but he still wished there was another way. "Are we going to the interrogation room now? This doesn't look like the wing of a prison."

"You are correct," Tenel Ka said as they stopped in front of the door. "Come, Jacen. Let me show you to your quarters. Trista and Taryn will prepare the prisoners."

"Very good, Majesty," Trista gave a short bow, as did Taryn. The two women then continued walking down the hall, leaving Jacen and Tenel Ka to watch their backs.

Gently, Tenel Ka placed her hand on Jacen's arm. "Come," she said, and opened the door.

The round, windowless chamber on the other side was just as brilliant and white as the hallway. The tables were carved of some crystalline substance and some kind of silver-and-gold patterned fabric was draped across the wide sofas. Jacen barely noticed the opulence. His attention immediately fell on the four-year-old girl in the soft blue dress with her legs dangling off the edge of a chair far too big for her.

"Allana!" he said, and stepped forward to her.

"Yedi Yacen!" the girl said. She plopped out of her chair and went at him with arms open. Jacen dropped down on her knee and pulled the girl to his chest. He pressed her head against his collar and nestled his nose in her messy crown of red hair.

"Are you okay, Yacen?" the girl lisped. "Mama's been really worried about stuff."

"I am better now that Uncle Jacen is here," Tenel Ka said behind them.

Uncle Jacen. The words were a knife in Jacen's heart. Allana was far too young to keep a secret, and on the occasions when Jacen managed to sneak off to Hapes, usually with some doll or trinket in tow, Allana thought he was nothing more than an old family friend. To his own daughter, Jacen was nothing more than a man who dropped by now and then to give her gifts.

Not for the first time he wondered how, after everywhere he'd been and everything he'd accomplished, the universe had made him into a man who was a virtual stranger to his own daughter.

He held her tighter and said, "It's going to be okay now, Allana. I'm glad you're safe, I really am. When your mom called me I thought—"

His voice caught in his throat. Allana pulled her head back, looked up at him with bright gray eyes, and asked "What is it, Uncle Yacen? Are you okay?"

He stroked her hair and blinked tears from his eyes. "I'm fine. Just knowing you're okay is all I needed."

Tenel Ka crouched next to her daughter. "Allana, Uncle Jacen and I have somethings to talk about. Go find DD11. She wants to run over your lessons."

"Okay," Allana said in a mooney voice. "If you say so."

"Those lessons are important," Tenel Ka stroked her hair. "Go on. You can play with Uncle Jacen later."

"I hope so!" her face brightened. She gave Jacen a quizzical look and asked, "Did you bring me any presents this time?"

"I'm sorry, I forgot." He put on a fake smile. "I was in a rush to leave. Next time I'll bring you something nice, how's that?"

"Great!" Allana nodded eagerly.

“Go to your lessons dear,” Tenel Ka prodded her.

Allana nodded and trotted over to the door on the far side of the chamber. It slid open, letting her pass, then slid shut again, leaving Jacen and Tenel Ka alone at last.

They'd gone through moments like this on all his other visits. Normally they would release all the built-up tension, fall into each other's arms, kiss, and maybe fall further, but right now they remained crouched an arm's space apart, waiting for the other to move.

Finally, Tenel Ka rose to her feet. So did Jacen. As soon as he was upright Tenel Ka took one step closer and pitched against his chest. Her one arm wrapped tight around his waist and she rested her head on his shoulder.

“I'm so sorry,” he muttered as he put both arms around her.

“It's all right,” she tilted her head and kissed him on the cheek. “We will find a way around this.”

“Your father, do you think he's in... physical danger?”

“I do not know.” She ran her hand up and down the length of his spine. “The message said nothing substantial. And the Force... it tells me nothing about my father. It never has.”

Jacen knew that feeling. Though he could sometimes sense his father's moods in the Force, he could never touch Han Solo across long distances like he could his mother or siblings. He had always believed, deep down, that if harm really befell his father he would know. Tenel Ka had likely believed the same until two days ago.

“Is Allana okay?” he asked. “Does she understand what's happening?”

“I haven't explained yet,” Tenel Ka sighed.

After a pause, he said, “Those sisters, Taryn and Trista... what do they know?”

"About us? They know that you are my old friend, Jacen Solo."

"And about Allana? Have they seen her?"

"They have, and she is fond of them." Tenel Ka pulled her head off his shoulder and looked him in the eye. "They do not know who the father is. They have never asked. I trust them, more than anyone else in the palace, but I won't tell them that."

"I'm surprised I've never met them before."

"They have most been in the field. I recalled them to Hapes for this current emergency."

"*Current* emergency?" Jacen frowned. "Have there been others?"

"Nothing I could not handle, Jacen."

He ran the tips of his fingers along her face, from wide cheekbone down to proud chin. "If you have any problems, any at all, you can rely on me. You know that. I'll get here as fast as I can, every time."

"I know," she smiled a little. "That is exactly why I save the important problems for you."

"Like interrogation?"

The smile disappeared. "I'm afraid so. Naturally, we have interrogators of our own, but no Jedi. I'm afraid this time we may need your special touch."

"I'll do what I can," he said, "But I don't want to harm people if I don't have to."

"You are a great Jedi Knight. Of course you don't," she said, and raised her head to give him a short kiss on the mouth. Then she stepped back and said, "Come, let me show you where you can lay your bags. Then you'll have work to do."

Gradually and with great reluctance, Tenel Ka Djo had come to admit that there *were* advantages to being Queen of Hapes. The situation room in which she currently stood was ample proof of that. The Hapan

Royal Guard trained some of the best intelligence operatives in the galaxy, and right now they were giving her a run-down of everything they'd been able to learn about her father's kidnapping, most of it gathered through various interstellar surveillance systems operated from this very room.

Right now one of her chief guards, Major Espara, was demonstrating their findings with a holo-chart of the Gallinore system. The tall, black-haired woman had a metal pointer stick in one hand and she lectured with the precision of a martinet schoolteacher.

"From our estimates based on trace thrust elements, whoever kidnapped your father dropped out of hyperspace immediately before he was going to leave the system. They must have also known *when* your father would leave Gallinore and what exit vector he would be taking."

Beside her, Taryn Zel said, "He was coming back to Hapes. It doesn't take a genius to figure out which direction he'd be going after leaving Gallinore."

Espara had the holo zoom in on the site of the kidnapping. The incident had taken place in empty space at the edge of Gallinore's gravity well, but the holo showed a blue line tracing the residual thrust of her father's shuttle and a red line marking where the kidnappers had come from.

"As you can see from the short thrust trail," said Espara, "The kidnappers dropped out of hyperspace right in front of the Prince's shuttle. They must have known exactly when and exactly where he would be going."

Trista clicked her tongue. "Sounds like a tracer device on his ship."

"Very likely," Espara nodded. "That, or they received last-minute flight information from Gallinore."

"I already have people interrogating the flight control crew." Trista said. "We have no leads so far."

"Can the thrust residue tell us anything about the ship the kidnappers used?" Tenel Ka asked.

Espara shook her head. "Very little, Your Majesty, though the residue is a bit thicker than that from your father's ship. That might indicate an older ship with a less efficient engine model that leaves more exhaust. What really strikes me is the very minimal amount of residual plasma and the complete lack of debris."

"No sign of ion cannon use?" asked Taryn.

Espara shook her head. "They definitely used plasma cannons. Either they cleaned up debris afterward, or they only fired over the Prince's bow. I'd lean toward the latter, since kidnappers are usually keen to leave the crime scene as soon as possible."

Tenel Ka shook her head. For all the information and analysis her people could gather, it still told them frustratingly little about what had happened to her father. She asked, "What can we learn from the ransom message?"

"Very little from the message itself" Taryn admitted. "They request that yours and Allana's blood samples be sent to Krizlar Station using the AlTark method."

The AlTark method had been invented by an eponymous Hapan noblewoman a long time ago as a way to make genetic sampling verifiable. It involved using special custom-made syringes that prevented blood samples from being tampered with and recorded the exact time they had been taken.

From the request, it was clear that someone was going after her family. Most likely they were trying to determine the paternity of Allana's father. Inviting Jacen to Hapes had made the risk of that even greater than before, but there was no one she trusted to solve this crisis more than Jacen.

More than that, she'd simply wanted an excuse to see him again. A small part of her was ashamed for using such a serious crisis for a petty personal desire, but only a small one.

"Why do we think they chose Krizlar?" Tenel Ka asked.

"There are a few possibilities," Espara said. "It is near the Hapan Consortium, but outside our jurisdiction, or *any* jurisdiction. It is also a very old space station with many places to hide. It is full of civilians, which rules out a display of Hapan military might. From the kidnapper's point of view, it is the perfect place for a quiet, anonymous exchange."

"Or an ambush," Trista said. "That station is a labyrinth inside. No one knows all the ways in and out. Your majesty, have you considered that this is all a plot to lure you away from Hapes?"

"I have," she said, and did not tell them she was intent on going to Krizlar herself. They would try to stop her, and she didn't want to have this argument now. "However, I cannot help but feel that Allana is the primary target in this. If they want to strike at me, they will do it through my daughter."

"Things should be easier once we determine who helped the kidnappers," Espara said. "Your Majesty, is your Jedi friend at work now?"

"He has begun interrogations," Tenel Ka nodded.

She hated herself for giving Jacen such an ugly duty, but once again, it was something he could do better than anyone. Sometimes it troubled her that the man she loved possessed such dangerous skills, but at the same time his clear reluctance to use his powers reminded her what a wise and trustworthy Jedi he was.

"Your Majesty," Trista said cautiously, "My sister and I request that you allow us to follow up on whatever leads the Jedi uncovers."

“Do you now?” she raised an eyebrow.

“We do, Your Majesty,” Taryn nodded. “With your permission, we will do everything in our power to catch your father's kidnappers.”

She understood the sense of responsibility and guilt the women felt. The Zel sisters were Prince Isolder's nieces, and their primary duties involved keeping Isolder safe. A minor conflict of interest was responsible for them not being with him at Gallinore, and they blamed themselves for letting him down.

A long time ago, when she had been a youth desperate to get away from everything Hapan, the Zel sisters had been strange peripheral figures, ones she interacted with only during shared classes her father put them through. Tenel Ka had admired Trista's cool demeanor but found Taryn's more exuberant personality annoying. Because the twins had been near-inseparable, Tenel Ka had avoided Trista because she hadn't wanted to be near Taryn. Now, after over a decade governing Hapes, she had come to trust both of them more than anyone.

Anyone except Jacen, of course.

She knew they would fight all the harder when she'd insist on going to Krizlar, but for now she obliged them and said, “Of course. Your devotion is appreciated.”

The sisters nodded in unison, seemingly satisfied.

“Can we rely on your Jedi?” Espara asked cautiously.

Like most Hapans, Espara retained a distrust for Force-users. Tenel Ka often sensed a lingering unease from Espara about her Queen, but the major was professional and patriotic enough to obey her Hapan Queen, Jedi training or no.

“I trust his abilities,” Tenel Ka inclined her head.

“And will the prisoners remain... unharmed?”

“Most certainly,” Tenel Ka said stiffly. The idea that a Jedi, Jacen especially, would damage another sentient

without cause was insulting, but not uncommon on Hapes, even among her most loyal officers.

"Very well." Espara said, paused, then added, "If harsher actions are required, I will have people standing by."

Tenel Ka restrained a bitter smile. After all these years, she sometimes forgot that *harshness* was not a bad thing on Hapes.

"Rest assured," she said, "Those services will *not* be necessary."

The Lady Vantar was the fourth person Jacen interrogated. The first had been a servant to one Duchess AlGray, the second had been a minor palace aide, the third Vantar's own daughter.

They had the woman bound to a chair and placed in an empty gray room. She was about the age of Jacen's mother, and like Leia she had a certain diplomatic poise that spoke of a long aristocratic upbringing. Also like Leia, she had a keen intelligence and defiant glare in her dark eyes. Unlike Leia, Jacen knew she hadn't been tortured before. He didn't want to torture her now, but he was afraid he might have to. It hadn't taken much prodding with the Force to reveal that the previous three suspects knew nothing about Isolder's kidnapping. This woman, though, radiated a fear in the Force, a fear she kept off her face but didn't know how to hide from a Jedi.

For a while he just sat there in the chair opposite Lady Vantar and watched those dark eyes. He wondered what would break an aristocrat like this. She probably valued her appearance, and a few cuts on her face might wound her vanity enough to make her talk. Threats to her daughter might work too, though knowing how ruthless Hapan nobles could be, they might also fall flat.

After he stared at her for a good five minutes, Lady Vantar said, "Are you one of the Queen's Jedi friends?"

He'd left his lightsaber in his quarters, but he supposed it was an easy thing to guess. All the other Hapan security people were women.

"I am." He saw no point in denying it.

Vantar sighed. "Well, I'm not surprised."

"Were you expecting to be interrogated?" Jacen arched an eyebrow.

The woman didn't take his bait. "I have no idea why I was taken, but once I was, well, I didn't expect it to be pretty."

"You really have no idea why they've detained you?"

"As far as I know, nothing has gone awry in the palace. If you'd like to enlighten me, I might be able to help."

Jacen gave a sardonic smile. "And how can you help me?"

"If I know what crime has been committed, I can point you to some suspects."

"A court gossip, are you?"

"Oh, Mr. Jedi, the court is full of gossips, but I like to think I listen more than I talk."

"My mother always said that was an important trait. You remind me of her." Jacen said.

"Really?" Vantar tilted her head. Somehow her face took on a maternal expression. "How is that?"

Jacen didn't answer. He reached out with the Force to touch her mind. He sensed fear, definitely, but also control. She was an older woman, and she'd fought hard all her life to remain on top in the treacherous world of Hapan court politics. He sensed resentment of Jedi typical of Hapans, and something else too. A tinge of curiosity, perhaps.

He asked, "Do you know who my mother is?"

Vantar smiled politely. "I'm sorry, young man, I'm afraid I don't."

"My mother is Leia Organa Solo, former president of the New Republic. My name is Jacen Solo. Have you heard of me?"

It didn't show on her face, but his name spiked her alarm. She said, smooth and polite, "I believe I've heard of you, though I don't follow Jedi politics too closely. I believe you are a friend of the Queen, yes?"

"I am," he nodded. "We went to the Jedi Academy together. I consider her one of my closest friends."

"I'm glad a great and powerful Jedi still has time to spare for old friends."

"Yes. So am I."

He leaned in closer and tried to press deeper into her thoughts. At the mention of his name he'd felt shock, and also hatred and envy and, still, curiosity. In the gossip-filled Hapan court, the rumor must have gone around that Jacen was a potential father for Tenel Ka's child. Tenel Ka had used the Force to prolong her pregnancy so that she gave birth over a year after she'd last seen Jacen on Hapes, but rumors were hard to kill.

"Tell me," Jacen said, "What do you know about Tenel Ka's child?"

"I'm afraid no one in the court has ever seen her," Vantar said. "There are rumors about possible deformities, and questions of her heritage... Tell me, Jedi, has your old friend not confided to you?"

He decided to test her again. "I'm afraid Tenel Ka's child has been kidnapped."

One thought rang clear in Vantar's mind: *Liar*. But she said with authentic-sounding shock, "I'm so sorry to hear that. How was she taken?"

Jacen's lips formed a cruel smile. "Liar," he echoed back at her.

Vantar blinked once in naked surprise. "Excuse me?"

"You knew Tenel Ka's child was *not* kidnapped," he said firmly. "But you do know who *was*."

"I'm sorry, I don't know what you're talking about." Vantar acted confused, but her mask was starting to slip. "Are you trying to play some of those Jedi mind tricks I've heard about?"

Jacen got to his feet so he could look down on the older woman. "You know Tenel Ka's child was not kidnapped. Which means you know who *was*."

She shook her head. "Young man, I really think--"

He reached out and grabbed her face, holding her by the chin with a firm four-fingered grip. He leaned in close enough to see honest fear in her eyes and asked, "Where is Prince Isolder?"

Vantar blinked once, twice. Her jaw worked against Jacen's grip. He reached into her mind again, and instead of just observing her thoughts he forced a spike of fear into them.

"I... I don't know," she stuttered.

"Who took him?"

"I don't *know*."

"What *do* you know? Tell me. Now."

"They... they contacted me."

"Who?"

"I don't *know*!" she repeated. "They just wanted Isolder. They said if I helped them, they would tell me who the father of Tenel Ka's child is!"

Jacen was tempted to reveal the truth to this woman, just to see her reaction. Instead he asked, "Did you plan on blackmailing the Queen Mother? Is that it?"

"I... I don't know!" Thin trails of water ran from her eyes. "I thought it would be useful information, that's it!"

Useful for blackmail, and all other kinds of dangerous purposes. Jacen stared into the woman's weeping eyes, felt all the fear and confusion in her mind, and knew no pity at all. This was a woman who played with the lives of others, even innocent children, for her own gain. She

was just a smaller, pettier, less powerful version of Ta'a Chume herself.

And Jacen had taken care of Ta'a Chume.

He fought down the ugly temptation. This woman still needed a full interrogation, and when it was done she would be thrown in the palace dungeons and would never see daylight again. And she would never, ever know who had fathered Tenel Ka's child.

He dug his fingers into her chin, making her wince. "You are going to tell me exactly how they contacted you. You are going to do everything in your power to help us find Prince Isolder, is that clear?"

Her held her so tight she couldn't even nod, but he felt her surrender in the Force. It brought a smile to his lips.

"Talk," he said.

Allana was visibly nervous as she sat on the sofa. Her mother was seated on one side of her, her father on the other. The Zel sisters stood behind the sofa but looked ready to spring if Allana made a run for it.

Tenel Ka held a syringe in her hand, tipped by a thin needle-point. It was unlike any other syringe Jacen had ever seen; some encryption symbol was stamped its translucent outer surface, and the needle protruded from a thick metallic seal.

Tenel Ka had already explained that once the sample was taken, the syringe would be vacuum-sealed and marked with a time-stamp recording the exact moment in Galactic Standard when the sample was taken. Tenel Ka explained that the so-called AlTark device had been devised in the past so genetic and medical tests could not be tampered with after samples were taken. It struck Jacen as something only the Hapans, with their labyrinthine schemes and convoluted familial politics, could have produced.

"Do we have to do it?" Allana looked scared as she eyed the needle.

"It will only hurt for a second," Jacen told his daughter. When he saw she was trembling she squeezed her bare upper arm. His fingers wrapped all the way around, and he was shocked by how thin and fragile it was.

"Please hold still Allana," Tenel Ka said.

The girl looked away from the needle, at Jacen. "Yedi Jacen, why do we *have* to do this?"

"We just want to make sure you're not sick," Jacen held her eyes. He gave Tenel Ka a tiny nudge in the Force, saying *now*!

Tenel Ka stuck the needle in. The girl bleated and squeezed her eyes shut. The syringe filled with blood in a second, and Tenel Ka quickly drew it out. Jacen saw her press a tiny switch on the plunger end of the syringe, and the needle snapped off and fell into Tenel Ka's lap. She put the syringe, now a red-tinted cylinder, time-stamped and vacuum-sealed, into her pocket.

Tenel Ka smiled at her daughter. "We're all done now, Allana."

"My arm hurts," she frowned, and rubbed the invisible point where the needle has gone in.

"You did good, kid," Jacen patted her head. He was genuinely proud of her for not crying or shouting. It had taken him until his dramatic teenage years to learn to live with pain, and he hoped his daughter learned that lesson younger, and without the turbulence and loss he'd had to suffer.

Behind them, Trista said, "Now all we have to do is take it to the doctor."

"I'll take care of that," Jacen said. He'd come all the way out here to help Tenel Ka and he wasn't going to stop at simply interrogating a few petty nobles. His mission would end when Isolder was back safe and the

people who wanted to expose Allana's parentage were captured.

But when he held out his hand, Tenel Ka did not give the syringe to him. She simply stared at him with cool, grey eyes. He'd seen that look from her a thousand times, and he knew what it meant.

Apparently her cousins did too. Taryn said, "Your Majesty, you can't think to—"

"I can and I will," Tenel Ka said firmly. "This is a very important matter to me. I will handle it in person."

Allana blinked. "What is it, Mama? Aren't you just going to the doctor?"

Jacen fumbled for words. "Tenel Ka, I think you really should listen to Taryn. It would be much, ah—"

"I am not enfeebled," she said with a touch of resentment. "I will personally handle anything that directly affects my family. I that understood?"

"I understand," Jacen said. He learned a long time ago that he couldn't talk Tenel Ka out of something she really wanted. "I'd like to come with you, though."

Tenel Ka allowed a polite smile. "I would appreciate that, friend Jacen. We should hurry to prepare. Our appointment with the doctor is very soon."

"Good thing I packed light."

"Pack?" Allana looked back and forth, confused. "Uncle Yacen, where are you going?"

"We're going to meet a special doctor," Tenel Ka stroked her daughter's hair.

Allana looked a little scared. "What's wrong? Am I... sick?"

"No," Tenel Ka shook her head. "I'm getting the same test. So the doctor can compare samples."

"But... what's wrong?"

"It's just a test, dear," Trista said. "It will all be taken care of before you know it."

"Okay..." Allana frowned, clearly not convinced.

Tenel Ka said, "Aunt Taryn and Aunt Trista will take care of you while we're away, so don't worry."

"Your Majesty!" Taryn snapped. "You should allow us to come with you!"

"Two people is enough to visit the doctor, is it not?" Tenel Ka raised an eyebrow and fixed Taryn with another of those stony, I-will-not-be-moved stares.

Jacen felt he had to intervene, though he knew it would probably be useless. "Tenel Ka," he said, "It might be useful to have them come separately."

Two gray eyes flicked in his direction. "Separately?"

"You know, backup," he said in a low voice.

"The Jedi is smart," Trista said curtly. "It certainly couldn't hurt. We'll take our own ship."

Tenel Ka gave a short, sharp sigh. "Very well, but there is no need to follow us into the doctor's office. Just wait outside in case we need your help."

"With pleasure, your Majesty," Taryn said, with audible relief. She gave Jacen a tight, thankful nod.

Allana, still seated between her parents, looked at the adults with an expression of total confusion. Tenel Ka stroked her hair and looked back to Jacen. "However, I am sure there will be no major difficulties. As long as I am with my good friend, I have nothing to fear. Isn't that right, Jacen?"

Jacen was taken aback by the simple trust in her voice, the open show of love. It made him feel very heavy. He'd fought through bloody wars, been tortured by the Yuuzhan Vong, scoured the galaxy for new knowledge and been gifted with terrible visions, but right now all of them seemed immaterial compared to the crushing weight of Tenel Ka's trust.

He did his best to force a smile, for Tenel Ka's sake, and Allana's most of all. "Of course," he said. "I'll take care of everything. I promise."

CHAPTER FOUR

As they sat in the cockpit of *Jade Shadow*, watching hyperspace blur past the viewport, Ben looked to his mother and asked, “When we see Talon Karrde, is going to tell me how big I’ve gotten? ‘Cause I hate that.”

Mara had to stifle a laugh. From the co-pilot’s seat, Luke turned around and told Ben, “Karrde’s pretty perceptive. I don’t think you have to worry.”

“Good.” The boy crossed his arms over his chest. He was slumped awkwardly in his seat with his one leg still in a cast and jutting out into the cockpit’s central aisle.

Mara wanted to know if Ben remembered meeting Karrde at all, but she knew better than to ask. It had been almost ten years, by her count, and he would have been too small to remember clearly. He hated being reminded how young he was, and Mara didn’t exactly like being reminded how old she was getting either.

“I think this will be a good mission,” Luke said.

“Yeah,” Ben said, a little grudgingly. “Thanks for letting me come along, even with the busted leg.”

“Well, we won’t be doing any crazy chases, at least not yet,” Mara said.

“The important thing is we’re still helping Kalenda,” Ben said. “I didn’t want to bail on a mission, especially since I’m the one who screwed it up.”

"You didn't screw it up, Ben," Luke tried to sound soothing. "You really shouldn't have been at that bar in the first place."

"You're blaming it on Jacen again, aren't you?" Ben frowned.

"We're not blaming anybody," she said. She and Luke had talked earlier about getting Ben to train at the Temple instead of in the field with Jacen, even though so far he'd ever shown any interest or inclination to learn when he was with his cousin. After his little incident in Windlash Alley, Luke had been quietly but firmly insistent that they take him away from Jacen then and there. Mara had been reticent, but Luke apparently was going through with it.

And apparently, he thought now was a good time.

He said, "Ben, your mother and I have done some talking. We think, for a little while, it would be best if you have some training in the Temple."

She held her breath. She hadn't expected Ben to throw a tantrum like a child, but she certainly expected Luke's offer to be met with a surly frown and a turn of the head.

Instead, Ben held his father's eyes. Seeming far older than twelve, he asked. "I'm learning things from Jacen they never teach the other apprentices."

"And there's thing the other kids are learning that you'll never got from Jacen."

"That's because you don't like his view of the Force, isn't it?" Ben said it calmly and reasonably, not pouting or whining at all.

"That's not it," Luke said, even though it partly was, but Mara let him go without interruption. "What you've learned from Jacen is important, but it's not *all* a Jedi should be. You don't have to follow your mother and me around all day. In fact, you shouldn't. There are plenty of other masters in the Temple who'd be willing to train you."

Assurance that he wasn't going to be tied to mom and dad seemed to dent Ben's resolve but it didn't break through. He said, "What if I agree to take lessons with Masters Horn or Katarn when I'm not with Jacen?"

It was a good negotiating ploy. If Luke was still adamant about separating his son from Jacen, he'd look unreasonable.

Luke gave a tolerant smile. "When this is all over I'll talk to Jacen and see if he can't loan you more often. How does that sound?"

Ben regarding him with suspicion. "How often?"

"Well, we'll have to talk that over and decide."

He rolled his eyes. "So pretty much all the time then."

"Ben, we just--"

"I'll be in my cabin for a while," he said. He plucked his crutch from beside his seat, stood up, and hobbled out of the cockpit, cast clanging on the deck over and over.

Luke sighed and sunk back in his seat. "You could have helped me out, you know."

"This was your idea. I don't want to be dragged into it more than you already had."

"Mara, we talked about this. We agreed Ben needs to spend time away from Jacen. He was almost *killed*."

"The way I understand it, Jacen saved him."

"If it weren't for Jacen, he wouldn't have even been there in the first place."

An awkward silence settled over the cockpit. Mara shifted in her seat so she could face him better. "It's not just about Ben getting hurt. You've wanted to do this for a while. You think Jacen's a bad influence."

"Not a *bad* influence. He's Ben *only* influence and *that's* a problem. Ben's young and he's just starting to learn what being a Jedi is. If hes going to grow up and be a proper Jedi he should learn from someone more... orthodox."

"Oh, like I did?"

"That's not what I meant."

"Not everyone can get private lessons from a nine-hundred-year-old green wizard, Luke. A lot of the important stuff we have to teach to ourselves. Frankly, that's the only way anyone can grow up. Even Yoda and Kenobi told you that you had to kill your father, but you chose a different path. You redeemed him instead. You disobeyed your masters and came out wiser."

"I was an adult then. Ben is *twelve*."

"I was even younger when the Emperor started giving me missions."

"Are you saying you want Ben to grow up like you did? Or are you comparing Jacen to Palpatine?"

She paused, thought. Luke had a wry little 'gotcha' smile on his face.

"Okay," she admitted, "I'm definitely not suggesting either of those. I'm just saying it doesn't do Ben harm to go on missions with Jacen. They're not just master-student, they're friends too, and let's be honest, Ben's never had a lot of those. Jacen likes the boy and respects him, and Ben knows that. It makes him feel adult. The worst thing to do to a teenager is treat him like a kid."

"Ben's not a teen for another year."

"Fine. A young adult."

Luke blew out a breath. "Young *adult*? That seems... a little much, isn't it?"

"He's smart. He's growing up fast. He's going to be something really special soon." Mara said with pride.

"I know." Luke reached across the aisle and touched her arm. "Even if he is a young adult, he's still *young*. He still need our guidance."

"I'm not saying he doesn't." Mara frowned. "This comes down to Jacen, doesn't it? Don't you trust him?"

"I do," Luke said, after a tiny pause. Only his wife could have caught it.

"Jacen's never been an orthodox Jedi. That's what makes *him* special. That's how he defeated the Yuuzhan Vong and helped end the Swarm War. I know you don't like all the ideas he's picked up over the years, and I don't either. Frankly though, I don't think that's important."

Luke frowned. "Ideas are always important. That's what the Force is, thoughts."

"Luke, I was raised as a soldier and a spy. I trust the Force because it *does* things. I trust people for the same reason. When it comes to Jacen, I don't care if he thinks the Force has no dark side or that anger is a tool. I care about him ending two wars and saving our lives, and millions of others, and most of all I care that he got our son to use the Force after hiding himself from it for his whole childhood."

Luke pulled his hand away. "You're not going to back me up on this, are you?"

"Luke, if we pull Ben away from Jacen, I'm afraid he might never use the Force again."

"That's silly. He's getting more confident every day."

"Like you said, farmboy, he's still young. I think he could backslide easily."

Luke crossed his arms over his chest and stared at the blur of hyperspace. For a moment the old Grand Master was the one who looked like a pouting child, and Mara chuckled against herself.

"What?" he looked at her.

"You know, Skywalker, you haven't changed much after all these years." She reached out to run a finger lightly up the lines of his face and brush the gray in his hair. "Still on the straight and narrow."

"Maybe," he admitted. "There's nothing wrong with wanting Ben to be like that too."

"There isn't. But in the end each of us has to make choices for ourselves, Luke. Each and every one."

Luke considered for a moment. Then he said, "Have you ever heard the saying, 'the choices of one shape the futures of all'?"

"Once or twice."

"It's especially true for people like us. There's more weight to Jedi's actions than other beings. I've let my students down before, Mara, and it's cost many lives."

"Oh, you're old and wise now, Skywalker. You're not going to let another Kyp Durrone or Kueller sneak through."

"I hope so." He gave a weak smile.

"I know so." She squeezed his arm. "Trust your kid, Skywalker. I'm pretty sure he's going to come out all right."

In all her travels, in all her missions for the Emperor or Karrde or even the Jedi Order, Mara could not remember stepping foot on Ukio. There was never reason to. The planet was the breadbasket for an entire sector, and while that made it important in an economic and ecological sense, it also made it the kind of planet where nothing important ever happened. Thus, Mara was still confused as to why Talon Karrde, a man who'd made a career out of being in the right place at the right time, would purposely settle down on a place with no right time whatsoever.

As *Jade Shadow* entered the planet's upper atmosphere, Ben leaned forward in his passenger's seat, let out a whistle, and said, "That is a *whole* lot of nothing."

Even Luke chuckled at that. The planet's southwest hemisphere filled the viewport and it was, indeed, a whole lot of nothing. No mountains, no lakes, not even deserts or ice formations. It was just a vast spread of flat, brown farmland, its regular surface interrupted only

occasionally by puffy white drifts of clouds that dragged dark shadows across the fields.

"Seriously, Mom," Ben said, "Is this where Talon Karrde's hanging out nowadays?"

"Well, unless he's playing an elaborate practical joke, yes." Mara scanned the ground with her naked eyes as they flew closer to the coordinates that had been relayed to them from orbit. She spotted several dark, metallic spots breaking the monotony of endless planted fields.

Luke saw it too. "That must be him."

Mara turned on her short-range broadcast transceiver and said, "This is *Jade Shadow* coming in for landing. Please confirm that we are cleared for entry."

A moment later a mechanical voice, the same one they'd talked to in orbit, said, "Please set down at Plot A17-B9."

"Copy that," Mara told the computer, then switched off her link.

As she drew closer to the coordinates, she could make out her target. A broad landing field, probably duracrete, was set off to one side of a complex of high metal silos, three longhouse-style buildings that almost looked like military barracks, two broader warehouses, and what looked to be a farmhouse. What really grabbed her attention was the other vehicle in the landing zone. It took up half the entire pad, and though it was mostly covered with a massive tarpaulin colored the same brown as the fields, she recognized it immediately as the *Wild Karrde*.

Her old home.

As she set down *Jade Shadow* she recognized a pair of figures on the landing pad. After killing the engines and repulsorlifts and helping Ben out of his seat, she immediately headed for the landing ramp.

Ukio was about as far from Coruscant as a being could get. Flat field stretched out in every direction. The air

was thing and dry and the sun shone hot through a clear blue sky. Mara found she wasn't used to so much sky, so much light, and she had a hold a hand over her blinking eyes.

"So, you're paying a visit at last," her old boss said as he approached.

Karrde had his hands stuck in his trouser pockets as he sauntered forward, but she recognized his ragged sleeveless vest as one he'd always worn. She noticed all the gray in his long hair and trim beard, and thought there were new wrinkle-lines trailing down from his mouth and eyes. Then she wondered if she looked any older to him.

Despite it all, she took her hand off her forehead and, still squinting a little, cheerily said "Next time pick a better location."

Then she shifted her vision to the person hanging behind Karrde on his right. She was a tall woman, taller than Mara, with dark hair elaborated braided down her back and shoulders. Like Karrde, Shada D'ukal had aged since Mara last saw her during the Yuuzhan Vong War, though that wasn't the most surprising thing. Shada and Karrde's relationship had always been rather nebulous, part business partners, part friends, and possibly part something else, though Karrde had always insisted otherwise. The fact that Shada had followed Karrde out here to farm on Ukio suggested that the *something else* was in play.

She covered her surprise with a polite smile and nod. "Good to see you too, Shada. It's been too long."

The former Mistryl Guard nodded coolly. Like Mara, Shada had had a career as an assassin and mercenary before hooking up with Karrde. Despite their similarities, they'd never been especially close, as Shada had joined Karrde's crew at the same time Mara was leaving it to become a Jedi and a wife.

Behind Mara, Luke and Ben made their way down the landing pad. She looked over her shoulder to see Ben hobbling along with one crutch under his arm and trying not to show how annoyed he was with the whole situation.

"It's good to see you both," said Luke. "Thank you for having us."

Karrde held out both arms. "Oh, we have plenty of room for visitors. In fact, we get lonely sometimes, don't we, Shada?"

"Only sometimes," the Mistryl deadpanned.

Karrde cracked his knuckles and said, "Welcome to our abode, Master Skywalker, and Ben too, of course."

He made no comments whatsoever about how much Ben had grown. The boy's relief was palpable even without the Force.

He waved an arm to the farmhouse. "Come on, we can pour a few drinks and talk. Shada, you've chilled the wine, haven't you?"

She turned back toward the house. "Of course, dear. Just the way you like it."

Mara shot Karrde a look, and for a second it looked like the old smuggler blushed. Then he scratched his long graying hair and said, "Come on, this is a special treat. All of it's grown, fermented, and bottled right here on my property. Let it never be said that I'm not an accommodating host."

As they followed Karrde and Shada to the farmhouse, Mara glanced back at Luke. They exchanged tight, knowing smiles over their son's head, but didn't say a thing.

The wine was good. Mara and Luke both had to admit that. Even Ben looked a little annoyed not to be sampling some himself, but that definitely wasn't going to happen. Mara Jade Skywalker generally prided herself

on being a permissive, tolerant, encouraging parent, but like everyone, she had limits.

Still, nice wine or no, she still couldn't wrap her mind around the current situation. Finally settling things with Shada might have encouraged Karrde to slow the pace down somewhat, but the two of them moving to Ukio and taking up agriculture and winery was a little much.

She knew Luke was as confused as she was, but his questions were all polite as the five of them sat in the living room of Karrde's house, looking out the broad glass windows at flat brown wheat fields stretching out forever in every direction.

"Is it really just the two of you working here?" Luke asked as Mara stewed in quiet confusion. "This seems like a lot of land for just two people to manage."

"Ag droids can do wonders," Shada said. "Five hundred acres and sometimes it feels like we don't need to be here at all."

Mara gave her a look that said, *Aren't you bored?* but the the Mistryl didn't seem to notice.

"Who do you export to?" Luke asked.

"Mostly other worlds in this sector, though we run special jobs to other clients." Karrde took a sip of wine. "Since Ukio wasn't ravaged in the Yuuzhan Vong War, it's become a more important agricultural hub than ever. Demand is high, which means profits are up."

"Who does the shipping?" Mara asked.

A light smile creased Karrde's face. "Most farmers on Ukio rely on private shipping companies to get their cargo off-world. We do bulk shipments through the big companies- better value for the money- but smaller shipments we do ourselves."

"So that's what you use *Wild Karrde* for nowadays?" Mara jabbed her thumb toward the landing pad. "Hauling *wheat*?"

"We produce processed foodstuffs too," Shada tapped her wine-glass. "And we're looking to expand the distillery."

Ben shifted on the sofa between Luke and Mara. At this point the boy looked increasingly bored. He probably didn't remember either Karrde or Shada at all.

Karrde said, "Mara, you're welcome to poke around *Wild Karrde* if you want. We've made some modifications, but she's still the same ship you knew."

"I might do that." Mara crossed her arms and tried not to show her displeasure. "We didn't just stop by the tour the farm, though."

"Of course," Karrde nodded. "You want to know about Paks Veem."

"I hadn't heard of him until a couple days ago. Is he really the hot new information dealer, or am I not totally out of the loop yet?"

Karrde stroked his goatee. It really had gone gray. "Well, he's been making a name in certain circles. The damage the Hutts took during the Vong War left a big opening for smaller dealers to make their names. I've never met him myself, but recently he managed to set up several shipping routes for illegal spice and weapons from the Outer Rim to the Core, mostly along the Hydian Way."

"Alliance Intel is going over some financial records from a client of his," Luke said. "Hopefully we can start tearing down whatever systems Veem has built up."

"Veem trained as a Jedi for a little while," Ben said.

Karrde raised his eyebrows. "Well, that is interesting. I've heard he's very perceptive, very good at reading his clients and figuring out what they want. I imagine Jedi skills would be good that that."

"He wasn't with us very long," Luke said defensively. "He only trained for a few months on Yavin 4. His

aptitude wasn't what we'd hoped, and he wasn't the most attentive student either."

Karrde shrugged. "Well, better a smuggler than another Sith Lord."

"I think we've had enough of those for a while," Shada agreed.

"Is there anything you can tell us about Veem?" Mara pressed. "Anything important at all?"

Karrde considered. "Like I said, I've never met him personally. I'm not sure if any of my contacts have."

Mara thought back to the other smuggling groups she and Karrde had worked with all those years ago. A lot had happened in the intervening years, and she wasn't sure which of her old acquaintances had survived the Yuuzhan Vong War, which had helped the Smuggler's Alliance that Karrde and Booster Terrik had put together, and which had helped the Peace Brigade hunt down Jedi for the Yuuzhan Vong.

"Who's still active from the old days?" Mara asked, a little ashamed she didn't know herself. "Clyngunn? Faughan? Gillespee?"

Karrde chuckled. "Believe it or not, Faughan and Gillespee are married now."

"Really?" Maybe it shouldn't have been surprising. The two of them had a long working partnership and there had always been rumors of romantic attaching between them. Not unlike Karrde and Shada. "So, have they bought a farm too?"

Karrde didn't blush that time. "Bought a saloon on Gyndine, I believe. Sold *Starry Ice* to H'sishi. She's got her own business now."

Mara smiled at the memory of the Togorian. She'd been big, furry, sharp-toothed and scary-looking, but had been one of Karrde's most loyal crew-members. "What about the others? Chin? Dankin? Aves?"

"Aves bought himself a freighter, mostly legitimate cargo. We hire him out sometimes," said Karrde. "Dankin works with H'sishi. As for Chin, he retired a while back. I think he's spent a lot of time touring the casinos of the galaxy."

Mara felt a little ashamed not to have kept in touch with her old friends, but felt grateful everyone had made it through the tumultuous war successfully.

The thoughtful, nostalgic pause was broken when Ben said, "Don't you know *anyone* who can help us?"

"I believe I do." Shada smiled. It was a knowing smile, and it made Karrde look a little uncomfortable.

"Mazzic." Mara said. She didn't have to guess. Shada had spent some twelve years working as a bodyguard to the Myke smuggler before joining Karrde's crew, and there had always been rumors as to what kind of additional services the beautiful Mistryl was providing.

Shada nodded. "I haven't talked to him for several months, but I believe he's mentioned some work with Veem."

"Where's Mazzic now?" Luke asked.

"He generally works out of Ord Mantell. I gather Veem does the same, which is why they've met several times."

"I thought Ord Mantell got wrecked by the Vong," Ben said.

"It's an old fringe haunt, so ships frequently gather there, even if the planet's surface is uninhabitable," Karrde said.

"Glad to see you're keeping track of these things," Mara said honestly.

Shada finished her wine and said, "I will drop Mazzic a line and see if he's still at Ord Mantell. I'll tell him to expect you."

"We'd appreciate that," Luke bowed his head.

“Well, I’m glad to see we could offer some help,” Karrde said. “Now Mara, how about that tour?”

While Shada commed her old boss and Luke and Ben got an impromptu lesson on farming from an agricultural droid, Karrde led Mara across the landing pad toward the tarp-covered bulk of *Wild Karrde*. It was strange seeing it here, on a planet’s surface. It looked almost like it was wrapped in a bedsheet and settled down for a nap.

“Is this really it?” she asked, not bothering to hide the incredulity and displeasure in her voice. When it was just the two of them, she could be honest. “Have you *really* settled down to *farm*, Karrde?”

He chuckled lightly as he unlocked the vessel’s port-side airlock. “It’s an honorable profession. Reliable one, too. People always need to eat.”

He put a hand on his arm, halting his motion. “They need information too. That used to be your business.”

“Oh, Mara, I haven’t gone into total retirement. You know me better than that.”

“You seem pretty retired to me. The rest of the crew seems to have gone their own ways too.”

“Oh, my organization is still around, just in a looser form. Or would you prefer I pull a Booster and turn *Wild Karrde* into a floating casino?”

“So H’sishi and Aves and the rest, do they still report to you?”

“Mara, we keep in touch. I still keep one ear to the ground and sometimes I pull strings. It’s not as formal as an organization as the old Smuggler’s Alliance, but it’s enough to get things done. I haven’t gone soft. I’ve just... slowed down a little.”

“Okay,” she held up both hands. “I believe you. I do. It’s just... *Ukio*? Really?”

“Really. You should see the sunrises and sunsets. Absolutely incredible. So are the stars at night. Reminds me of Myrkr, actually.”

Karrde pulled open the hatch and led Mara inside. *Wild Karrde* had never been a pretty vessel. From the outside she vaguely resembled a legless dewback and her insides were a tangle of gray corridors and small meeting rooms wrapped around a massive central hold. It certainly didn't have the elegance of the Jedi Temple on Coruscant, or even the ruined old ones on Yavin 4 and Ossus. It was a ship you could only love if you'd spent a dozen years on it.

They settled into one of the smaller meeting rooms. Mara could remember sitting around this circular table with Chin, Aves, and Dankin, sharing ale and swapping stories during long hyperspace flights. Those were times when she hadn't cared about whatever illicit cargo they were hauling, about getting caught, even about her old life as Emperor's Hand and the last command she'd received from the man who had raised her since childhood and molded her into his personal weapon.

She settled down on the hard leather cushions, looked around the dank ugly room, and smiled.

“Do you miss it?” Karrde asked as he sat down next to her.

“I was about to ask you the same question.”

“I already told you, we take her out for missions now and then.”

“*We*,” Mara glanced sideways at him and smiled. “How long have it been *we*?”

Karrde averted his eyes and stroked his gray beard again. “A few years. We'd been working together for so long that, well, naturally things progressed...”

She snorted. “You worked with me for years too and we never talked about settling down as a farmer's couple.”

He looked even more uncomfortable. "It meant a lot, getting through the Vong War together. We both lost people we'd cared about. It made things we *did* have seem more... important. Besides, *our* relationship was different from the start."

"I guess it was," she admitted. "You didn't really trust me for a long time, did you? Even though I saved your life the first time."

"Oh, I very grateful to you for that, obviously." He smiled and relaxed. "But I still didn't trust you. Do you remember what your alias was the first time we met on Varonat?"

She tried to peel back twenty years' worth of memories. It was difficult, but she found it eventually. "Celina Marniss. That's what I called myself then."

"That was a red flag right there. I'd recently had trouble with an employee of mine named Melina Carniss. Your alias wasn't just a clear alias, it was also a bad omen. How could I really trust a woman like that, even if she'd just saved my life?"

She stared at him. "Have you ever told me this before? I've never heard this."

"Oh, I must have told you. I'm sure I did."

"No. I don't think you did. You probably didn't trust enough, not at the beginning. And did you *really* used to work with Melina Carniss? I did. She was a dance instructor at the Jabba the Hutt's Palace when I went to kill Skywalker."

"I knew she used to work for Jabba. I didn't realize she was also working for the Imps when I hired her."

Mara had to laugh. It was the strangest coincidence, and she couldn't believe she was just hearing about it thirty years after the fact. It made her wonder what other weird secrets were lurking in her past.

"What happened to her?" she asked. "When you found out she was working for the Imps, what did you do?"

"Don't worry, I didn't kill her. I merely... returned her to her proper owners."

She laughed again. "I can't believe that. I can't believe you never told me, after all this time."

"I can't believe I haven't either. I was sure I had."

"Okay, trivia question for *you*." She poked him in the shoulder. "What was *your* alias when we met on Varonat?"

He stared off into the opposite wall with a look of furious concentration. Finally, he shook his head. "I have no rodding idea. It's been *thirty* years. What was it?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "I was hoping you did."

"Ah well," he sighed again. "Maybe one of us will remember."

"I hope so," she said. There were a lot of things in her past she'd like to forget, but meeting a good friend for the first time was a memory she wanted to keep. She wondered if she would have still remembered it if she hadn't changed lives from smuggler to Jedi Master.

"Those were good years," Karrde said distantly. He was still staring blankly at the opposite wall.

"You were a good boss," she said. "*Way* better than Palpatine."

He chuckled. "My, such flattery. I should put that on my business cards. The real question is, am I better than your *current* boss?"

"That... is something I don't think I want to get into." She felt herself going red.

Companionable silence settled over them. Mara stared at the far wall and tried to remember what posters Dankin had used to hand up there. Most of them had involved scantily-clad Zeltron pin-up girls, if memory served.

A thought came to her from nowhere, and she had to ask. "Have you and Shada thought about having kids?"

Karrde shook his head. "I think we're both a little old for it."

"Adoption, then."

"Mara, we are perfectly happy having each other and the business to care about in our silver years. Besides, I don't think I could handle children."

"You'd be surprised. If Han Solo can be a dad, anything's possible."

"Point taken. And if *you* could be a mother..." He trailed off, like he'd said too much.

She wanted to snap back some retort, but she couldn't. She couldn't imagine the woman she'd been thirty years ago raising a son. Even when she'd first married Luke, the idea of actually having children had been at once scary and vaguely repulsive. Much of that, she knew looking back, had been reticence about the new life she was leading. Going from Emperor's Hand to mercenary to smuggler had not been a totally unthinkable life path, but being wife and Jedi had seemed more abrupt. Her life with Skywalker had been harder to get used to than just about anything before that. In retrospect, she'd only truly realized she wanted children when Nom Anor's poison had threatened to steal that potential from her forever.

"I blame the Jedi," she said at last. "They get you every time. All that sweetness and light. It's insidious."

"Mmm. Isn't it just."

Another comfortable silence settled. She knew she'd have to leave *Wild Karrde* soon, and get back to her own ship, then fly off to Ord Mantell or wherever Mazzic was, but right now she simply enjoyed the peace and quiet and lingering memory of this old ship. Just as she hoped some parts of her past were gone forever, she was glad to see some parts of it lingered on.

"What did you do to my old quarters?" she asked, finally.

“Well, H'sishi actually moved into them for a while. She had to haul in a whole new bunk because yours was too small.”

“And now?”

“Now?” He stroked his beard again. “Honestly, I don't think it's being used for anything at all. But if you want to see them, we can.”

Mara looked at the nicked old table in front of her. It was dusty and derelict now, but it had brought back great memories from a past she'd thought she'd left behind forever. Her old room, made-over or not, would surely bring back more.

“Okay,” she said.

“You need help finding it?”

“No,” she rose from her seat, “I'm sure I know the way.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Tenel Ka's personal shuttle was not of any model Jacen had seen before, though it was clearly of Hapan design. It combined the curved forward-sweeping horizontal wings of a Miy'til fighter and the elongated body of a *Nova*-class cruiser on a vehicle about the size of the *Millennium Falcon*. Unlike his father's ship, the *Teneniel* was impressively sleek and new. Every corridor was white and spotless, and the cockpit contained enough automated systems that a one-armed woman could fly it single-handedly into combat if the need arose.

He watched with admiration from the co-pilot's seat, hands in his lap, as Tenel Ka flew her vessel out of Hapes' atmosphere, navigated past the orbital patrol ships, and finally jumped to hyperspace. Somewhere behind them, delayed by a minute or two to hide the fact that they were part of the same mission, the Zel sisters followed them out of Hapan space in an undistinguished tramp freighter.

Once *Teneniel* jumped, there was little else to do but wait. Normally Jacen would have been overjoyed to spend a six-hour flight alone with Tenel Ka; they could both finally drop the pretenses that wore them down every minute they were apart, and wore even worse when they were together but in the presence of others.

His urges seemed frivolous at the moment. Tenel Ka sat back in her chair and stared at the blur of hyperspace, her expression empty.

Jacen reached out and put a hand on her shoulder. "It will be all right. We'll get your father back *and* protect Allana, I promise."

"It is curious," she muttered.

"What's curious?" He could think of quite a few strange things about this setup, but he wanted to hear her thoughts.

"This scenario echoes other kidnappings in Hapes' past," Her voice was distant, thoughtful, and she didn't look at him. "However, I do not believe the kidnappers are Hapan."

Jacen frowned. During her interrogation, Lady Vantar had seemed to believe that her anonymous contacts were some other Hapans, probably agents for a more clever noble, and Jacen had accepted that belief naturally. The method of the exchange was Hapan as well: The time-stamped and vacuum-sealed tubes of blood contained samples from both mother and child, which would help to isolate which genes Allana received from her mother versus those from her father.

Sensing his doubt, Tenel Ka continued, "These methods have been used in various Hapan conflicts in the past, but some facts are strange. For one, they want us to rendezvous at the Krizlar Station."

Krizlar was a busy port station hanging in orbit over a red dwarf star not far outside Hapan space. Jacen had assumed the kidnappers wanted to perform the exchange outside the legal reach of Hapan security. It was also a large station full of civilians that would act as witnesses if the Hapans attempted to bring a Nova Cruiser or Battle Dragon to assist in negotiations.

"Even if it's outside Hapan space, it still makes sense to do it at Krizlar," he said.

"I am not sure." Tenel Ka frowned. "Nor am I certain my father will be anywhere near the station."

"They have to know we won't give them the blood samples unless we have your father."

"Perhaps they plan to give us a set of coordinates, and lead us off on a long chase."

"Then they won't get the samples." He added, "Not that we're going to give it to them anyway, right?"

"I will not allow our daughter's parentage to become public, Jacen, not even now."

"Good," he nodded. "But the thing is, even if they do get the samples, it's still going to be hard to prove I'm the father. They might be able to tell the father was a Jedi, but that won't get them much. Unless they have my DNA locked away someplace too."

"That is a strong possibility, which is why I doubt the kidnappers are Hapan."

Jacen knew there were a thousand different ways someone could have collected his DNA without his knowing, especially if he never suspected them in the first place.

"Then who are they?" he asked. "Who benefits from meddling with Hapan politics?"

"I do not know. We are a private people and we generally avoid getting involved with other nations' affairs."

"Unless a charming Jedi convinces you," he smiled a little.

"Of course." She didn't even look at him.

"Someone might want to destabilize the Hapan monarchy, maybe someone looking for territorial gains. Or, it could be someone with an anti-Jedi grudge." Carefully, he suggested, "It could be someone after your or me, personally."

"You talk as though someone knows Allana is our child."

"I've been doing everything I can to hide it, even from Luke and Mara. Even from Jaina."

"I am not loose-lipped either," she said defensively.

"I know. I didn't imply you were. But we're both important, Tenel Ka. Famous. People all around the galaxy have heard of us. It's also not a huge secret that we've been friends since the Academy. Frankly, if someone was drawing up a list of potential fathers for Allana, I'd be on the short list."

Tenel Ka tore her eyes away from the viewport. He was startled by their intensity, the way the blue blur outside reflected off the dull grey curve of her irises.

"We can conjecture for the next six hours," he said, "But nothing will be revealed until we arrive."

"I know," He exhaled. He reached his hand up to brush her face with his fingertips. He tightly traced a line from her high cheekbones down to her strong chin. "I hate this. We barely get any time together. We shouldn't have to spend it in crisis."

"We shouldn't have to hide our lives from the people we care about. Lies are suffocating, Jacen. Every time I look at Allana's face I see yours in it. I want to tell her that but I can't."

The thought wrenched his heart. "Some good it does being a queen and a Jedi. We can't even control our own lives."

She reached up and held his hand in her own. She squeezed hard; he'd forgotten how strong her grip was. "None of this is *right*, Jacen. But we have to live with it. Even a queen and a Jedi cannot remake the entire universe."

"There has to be something we can do."

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, Jacen. I know how it must hurt you."

Hurt didn't begin to cover it. He'd never told Tenel Ka about his vision of the Throne of Balance, where he saw

a grown-up Allana standing next to a dark man surrounded by acolytes. The Force had spoke to him then, telling him that Allana was going to bring him pain. He'd had the vision before Allana was even conceived, and at first he hadn't even been sure it was a literal vision of the future. He still wasn't, but the moment he saw Allana in her mother's arms, he knew with cruel certainty the fate his own daughter would bring him.

He couldn't tell Tenel Ka this. Since the moment of his vision he'd determined to shoulder this burden alone, which was why he'd kept it hidden from his sister, from Luke, and especially from Tenel Ka. She was putting herself in enough danger as it was. If he told her his secret, he was certain his pain would fall on her as well, and her life on Hapes was trial enough.

Still holding his hand tight, Tenel Ka tilted her head and asked, "What is it, Jacen? You look very sad."

"Of course I'm sad. We shouldn't have to be doing this." He couldn't hold her eyes. He didn't think he could lie to her if he did.

Softly, Tenel Ka asked, "Do you regret having a child?"

"No," he said at once, but deep down a small shameful part of him wondered if he did. Once he had wandered the galaxy, seeking new visions of the Force, hoping for a way to touch the universe as deeply as he had during that one divine moment at the end of the Yuuzhan Vong War, when he had fought Onimi. Deep down he'd known that exalted state was impossible to return to, but he'd still found joy in the seeking.

Then his vision had come to him, and nothing had been the same. The time for exploration had been over. In its place was duty, the pain of separation from his loved ones, and the expectation of greater pain to come.

He glanced, hesitantly, into her deep gray eyes, and for a moment he wanted to tell her everything again.

Then he looked away and said, "I only regret what we have to go through. Only the circumstances. I could never regret Allana."

He heard the brittle smile in her voice. "Nor could I."

"I just miss..." He fumbled for words. He couldn't tell her the whole truth, but he could tell her a part of it. "I miss what we had, once."

"When?"

"Things were so much simpler once. Before Allana, before you became queen, before the War."

"I had my mother then," she said, understanding. "You had your brother."

"And more. Yavin 4 was... idyllic, wasn't it? I mean, it was full of dangerous animals and it was wild and untamed, and we went through all sorts of crazy adventures, but..."

"I understand, friend Jacen." She squeezed his hand. "We were children then. Yavin 4 was the garden we played in. But we had to grow up."

Growing up. Such a simple term, a cliché even, but two easy words held weight he could have never imagined as a child. For Tenel Ka, growing up meant losing her mother and taking her place, living in exile in a civilization she hated, shouldering the burden of an entire nation far away from the people she cared about. Adulthood had been condemnation to a lonely existence, one the Tenel Ka on Yavin 4 would have hated.

For him, it had meant losing his brother and Chewbacca, then undergoing horrible breaking and rebuilding. More than anything, growing up had been leaning over the Pool of Knowledge and receiving the burden of Allana standing beside the dark man. For so long he'd wandered, free of any responsibility. There he was laid with a responsibility not even Tenel Ka could

imagine. He thought for the first time that his childhood self might have hated what he'd become.

"Growing up is not all terrible, Jacen." He heard something strange and sly in her voice, and finally looked up at her.

"How is that?"

"When I was a child, I was confused."

"You never seemed confused. You were almost the most assured person I knew, besides Luke. It was what I always liked about you."

Her smile faded. Seriously, she said, "I was confused about many things, friend Jacen. Most of all, you."

"Me?" He raised both eyebrows, honestly shocked.

Tenel Ka nodded. "It wasn't until I lost you to the Yuuzhan Vong that I realized what you'd meant to me all along."

Tenel Ka rose to her feet. She still held his hand, and he stood up to avoid twisting his arm. Leaning in close to him, so close her cool gray eyes were unavoidable, she said, "I had to grow up to take what I'd needed."

He found himself amused. "You 'took' me, is that it?"

Her hand released his and found its way up to his face. "Jacen, even now you are as blind as a Nevorian mole when it comes to women. Has anyone told you that?"

"My sister, once or twice."

"Jaina was always wise." She leaned in, kissed him once. She leaned in close and pressed her breasts against his chest.

"Tenel Ka," he said, "We're on a mission. Your-"

"Jacen please." Her voice trembled slightly and she looked down, as though suddenly taken by shame. "I've needed this."

So had he. His arms drifted up her back and onto her shoulders. He thought of all the times he'd wanted this when he was younger, and how he'd thought just having Tenel Ka's affection, holding her in his arms, breaking

through her cool affected exterior would solve all his problems.

That had been a long, long time ago, before the war. Before losing Anakin and Chewie, before Vergere and the Vong, before his vision of the Throne of Balance. Before he'd learned better.

Before he'd grown up.

Jacen bent slightly and whispered in her ear, "We have six hours. But I want time to be ready."

"Six hours is more than enough," she said. She picked up her head, gray eyes bright and eager this time, and kissed him again.

CHAPTER SIX

Ben leaned forward in *Jade Shadow's* cockpit as starlines reverted to stars and the looming green-gray sphere of Ord Mantell filled their viewport. Even from a distance, he could see a tiny silver flecks of hundreds of ships forming a loose ring in the planet's orbit.

"I can't remember the last time I was here," his mother said from the pilot's seat. "It didn't look like this, though."

"The Vong did a number on it, then?" Ben leaned forward in his rear seat. It was still awkward having his leg in a cast, stretched out in straight in front of him, constantly hitting against the back of his father's co-pilot seat.

"Lots of terraforming with Yuuzhan Vong-based biological lifeforms," Luke explained. "Huge swathes of this planet used to be waste dumping facilities. There was also a large belt of urban space."

He searched the planet's surface for signs of cities but found nothing. "Well, looks like that didn't stick, did it?"

"Well, yes and no," Mara said. "Without the Vong to maintain their bio-engineering projects, the planet's natural life-forms have been having a resurgence. It's been that way on a lot of Vong-formed worlds. Alliance

scientists and techs have been there to help the process on a lot of worlds-”

“Like Coruscant,” he said.

“Especially Coruscant.” Mara nodded. “Which makes people who live on, quote-unquote, 'less critical' planets mad. But what native population Ord Mantell had was never the political activist type, so the native and Vong biots on the surface have basically been left to themselves.”

Ben nodded like a good student. It was interesting, but it also made him uneasy. Uncle Han liked to complain that the Alliance was always getting into everybody else's business; other times it seemed like it wasn't doing enough.

“Nowadays,” Mara explained, “There's some effort to rebuild the old cities, usually by private interests. Mostly, though, it's being used as a meeting point for various traders, and smugglers and low-lives and whatever, just because it has a set of coordinates everybody already knows. Plus, the fact that there's no planetary government gives people more freedom to make less-than-legal transactions.”

It all sounded pretty exciting to Ben, but he tried to sound like a bored kid. “But we're not here for that, are we Mom?”

“Do you have Mazzic's frequency?” Luke asked his wife.

“Got it from Shada,” Mara nodded. “I have it patched into pre-set node four-two-one. Fire up the comm, dear.”

“Yes, ma'am,” Luke said, and flipped a few overhead switches to bring *Jade Shadow's* medium-range transceiver online.

“*Distant Rainbow* this is *Jade Shadow*. Repeat, this is *Jade Shadow*. Interested in a talk to an old friend?” Mara waited, but no response crackled over the comlink.

She said, "Well, how about a friend of a friend? If you're there, Mazzic, let me know. I promise this won't take long."

She waited, longer this time. She looked at Luke and he shrugged. She opened her mouth to speak again, and a voice scratched over the link, "Do you have any idea what kriffing time it is?"

Mara glanced at the console. "Um, just about noon Coruscant Standard time."

"Well, this ship isn't on Coruscant time." A long sigh crackled. "Shada said you'd be here in three hours."

"She gave you an ETA?"

"Yeah, she was always more considerate than you. No wonder Karrde picked her."

Ben's mom looked decidedly annoyed. "Mazzic, can we see you or not?"

"Okay, okay. I'll give you the coordinates. Can your ship do symmetrical docking?"

"We can. I thought *Rainbow* couldn't."

"Well, my dear, I'm not on *Distant Rainbow* anymore, as you'll find out shortly. Let me extend a welcome to *Eyeflash*."

"Accepted," Mara nodded curtly. "I'll see you in five. I hope you're presentable."

"I'm *always* presentable," Mazzic grouched, and the link went dead.

Silence settled over the cockpit. Ben coughed and said, "You sure have interesting friends, Mom."

"I've known all types," she shrugged, and kicked the thrusters on.

As they dipped into the planet's orbit, one ship emerged from the ring of vessels to meet them. From the outside, *Eyeflash* looked like a dagger stabbed through a pincushion. The docking ports were on the circular main hull, the bridge seemed to be on the flat-end of the dagger-shape's pommel, and the engine

emplacements blazed blue thrust around the narrowed point.

From the inside, though, it looked like a dirty, cobbled-together hunk of junk. It reminded Ben more than a little of the *Falcon*. The man who greeted them ever had the same indignant slouch as Uncle Han and roughly the same gray-white in his hair, though unlike Han he had a trim beard to match and, more importantly, a grey-blue tint to his weathered skin.

Mara led the way through the airlock into the entry chamber, while Luke and Ben, still hobbling awkwardly on one crutch, followed. She planted her hands on her hips and gave the man an up-down evaluating look. He gave her the same.

Finally, he said, "You got a new ship."

"So did you, Mazzic." Mara said.

"Mazzic scratched his beard. "The Vong got my last one."

"I know the feeling. She looks good, though. Unique."

"She gets the job done. Still got my preybird fighters too. My big ship's not as sleek and fancy-looking as yours, but I'm no Jedi queen."

Mara crossed her arms over her chest and cocked a hip. "I'm no queen. Never was, never will be."

She had a smug, playful tilt to her voice, not unlike Uncle Han when he met new people or old friends. It was strange, seeing his mother like this. He'd always known his mother hadn't always been a Jedi. Well, nobody was *always* a Jedi, but her path had been less straight and true than his father's. Most of the time that shone through little cracks in her Jedi facade, but now it seemed like she'd dropped the whole wall down.

Mazzic leaned to one side to look at Luke and Ben. "This the family I've heard so much about?"

Mara nodded. "My husband Luke. My son Ben."

“Yeah, I hear they’re kind of famous.” Mazzic scratched his beard again. “Well, come on. Let’s chat. Griv’s in the kitchen fixing some mean cups of caf.”

Without glancing back at her husband and son, Mara followed Mazzic down the hallway. “Need it, do you?”

“Darling, I’m not as young as I used to be,” Mazzic said.

Ben looked at his father and was surprised to see a tight little smile on the Grand Master’s face. He clapped Ben on the shoulder and said, “Come on. I’ll let you try some of that caf.”

When he did try it, it made Ben’s lip curl and his throat burn. Mazzic chuckled as he sat down on the opposite end of the scratched old table in the main hold, and to Ben’s chagrin his parents seemed amused too.

He’d rather have tried Karrde’s wine.

“You can handle it, kid,” the smuggler said. “It’ll put hair on your chest. Or something.”

“Or something,” Mara echoed. She was sitting on Ben’s right, Luke to his left. Mazzic faced them from across the table while, somewhere unseen, Mazzic’s partner rattled around in the kitchen.

“Well, let’s have it.” The smuggler folded his long blue hands on the tabletop next to his steaming mug.

“What did Shada tell you?” Mara asked.

“Just that you want to ask about a client I’ve had.”

“Are you willing to tell us about your clients?” Luke asked.

Mazzic shrugged. “I’ll do anything for a price.”

“How much?”

“Well, that depends on which client.”

“No favors for old friends?” Mara raised an eyebrow.

“Hey, I’m not in this game for free. You were never my crew and I was never as soft as Karrde anyway.”

Ben fought a frown. Uncle Han he loved. Karrde, he’d liked. This guy, he didn’t like much so far. He wondered

how many of this mother's old friends, acquaintances, or coworkers were like Mazzic.

Mara didn't seem ruffled by Mazzic's brusque manner. She took a sip of his caf, didn't wince at all, and said, "We want to know about a Gran named Paks Veem."

Mazzic's expression was blank. He drank some caf, put his mug on the table, and said, "What do you want to know?"

"So you've worked with him in the past?" Luke asked.

"I can't deny it," Mazzic shrugged. "He's a smart cookie. Very good at getting information. Even better than Karrde in his prime."

"That's a bold statement," Mara said.

"No offense," Mazzic chuckled. "What do you want with him?"

There was a short pause, and Ben wondered how much his parents would reveal. Mara said, "We're helping Alliance Intelligence track him down."

"You want to stick him in jail?" Mazzic cocked an eyebrow. "It would be a damn shame to lose him. He's sold me great info more than once, led me to some great deals." He drank some caf and added, "You know, if it's the *Alliance* that's paying me... we might be able to find a not-too-modest price."

His parents didn't exchange glances, but he felt it in the Force: the surprise, and the recrimination that they hadn't seen that angle coming.

Mazzic looked cocky now. "So tell me. Just why are the Jedi chasing *sleemos* like Veem over the galaxy? I thought you people would have better, nobler things than do than get your hands dirty with the common folk."

Ben felt indignation from his parents, especially his father, but more than he'd heard Jacen complain that the Jedi spent too much time in the Temple and too little

time in the streets. Strangely it had seemed much more palatable coming from his cousin.

"This *is* Jedi business," his father said firmly. "Paks Veem was once a student at my Jedi academy."

Mazzic blinked. Surprise took his cockiness away. "Really? Huh. That would explain stuff. I mean, the guy always had a pretty strong, you know, *sense* of things. He's great at reading situations, even reading people." He drummed his fingers on the tabletop. "So what, is he some Dark Jedi moonlighting as an information dealer? He doesn't seem the type to go swinging red lightsabers."

"He was only a student for a short time," Luke said. "He was very erratic and impatient. He was very... clever, but he lacked the inner poise we try to foster in the Jedi. He was always using the Force for little tricks, like showing up his classmates or playing pranks on them."

"Yeah, that sounds like Veem." Mazzic took another sip of caf. "So what happened, did you kick him out for bad behavior?"

"He left of his own accord."

"Yeah, that sounds like Veem. Guy doesn't like to stay in one place very often."

"So you don't know where he is?" Mara asked.

The cocky grin came back. "I didn't say that."

"Then you *do* know where he is?"

Mazzic leaned back and spread his hands. "This is where we talk price."

"Only if we know what we're paying for is worth it," Luke said with rare severity. His father wasn't enjoying Mazzic's games.

The smuggler crossed his arms over his chest. "Fifty thousand."

"Thirty," Mara said.

"Fifty-five."

"The Alliance only authorized us for thirty," Luke said. Ben tried to keep the surprise off his face. It wasn't often his father lied.

"Then you're out of luck. Sixty."

"Hold on," Mara said. "We might be able to go a little higher."

"Maybe you should call your paymasters and make sure. Sixty-five."

"Don't be ridiculous," Luke said. "We can't do more than double our budget. Forty."

Mazzic considered for a moment, then repeated, "Sixty-five."

"Forty-five."

The smuggler's eyes darted from Luke to Mara and back again, skimming over Ben's red head. He said, "Sixty."

"Fifty."

"Deal." Mazzic slapped a palm on the tabletop. "You'd better be good for it."

"You ever known any Jedi cheapskates?" Mara asked.

"I've never known any Jedi well enough they might stiff me."

Luke pulled a credit chip out of his pocket and tossed it across the table. "That gets you access to a private account. It will have fifty thousand credits in it before our ship departs."

"Pleasure doing business with you," Mazzic grinned and stuck it in the pocket of his vest.

"Where's Veem?" Mara asked.

"Don't know." Mazzic shrugged.

Luke gaped. Mara scowled. Ben leaned forward and asked, "Where's the best place to look for him?"

"You *do* talk!" Mazzic grinned. "Smart kid you raised, Jade. Speaks only when he has something to say."

Ben thought it was a lesson Mazzic could stand to learn, but didn't say so.

"Where should we look for Veem?" Mara said seriously.

Mazzic leaned forward. "Now, here's the thing. Paks Veem's not the kind that likes company. However, I've got a pretty good guess where he hangs out. I keep an eye on my favorite clients, in case I need to find 'em. Or in case I need to blackmail 'em for something. Now Veem, he spends a lot of time around Ord Mantell, especially on his personal ship, *Full Hand*. From there, he likes to send a lot of messages. Heavy encryption, so I don't know what's in 'em, but I *do* know where to."

"Where?" Luke asked.

"Planet called Kal'shikar."

"Never heard of it," said Luke. Neither had Ben.

His mother, however, frowned in concentration. She said, "I've heard of it. Somewhere outside the Meridian Sector, I think."

"Very good," Mazzic nodded. "The Imps teach you that?"

"Yes, actually." Mara got a distant look, like she was digging through old memories. "There wasn't much to teach. It was ravaged at the end of the Clone Wars."

"*After* the end," Mazzic said. "The Imps were trying to clean-up the last Separatists and something went bad. A ship crashed into the planet or something, ruined the ecosystem. It's still habitable, technically, but good luck growing enough food to live on. And it was never very populated anyway. Weird orbital patterns or something. The Seps were just using it as a fallback base when the Imps caught up to them."

"Like Honoghr," Luke said grimly.

"Something like that. The point is, there ain't nobody supposed to be living on that planet."

"Are you sure Paks Veem was sending his messages to Kal'shikar?"

"Dead sure."

"How long has he been doing that?" Ben spoke up.

"Another good question." Mazzic winked at him. "Just noticed it in the past three months. He used to send stuff to all sorts of places, but since then, *zip*, always to Kal'shikar. So I can't promise he'll be there, but whatever is there is connected to him in some way."

"And you never thought to check out Kal'shikar yourself?" Luke said skeptically.

Mazzic shrugged. "Never had a reason to go chasing ghosts. I *do* collect information in case it might come in handy later, though. Just like Karrde, just like Veem. Just like Alliance spooks too, I'd bet."

"Thank you Mazzic," his mother said. "This is the kind of information we were looking for."

"Glad to be of service." Mazzic tapped the credit chip in his pocket. "Tell you what. Before you go, I'll share a little treat. Raltiiirian Brandy, on the house."

"Brandy right after caf?" Mara raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Lady, I'm used to *mixing* the stuff." Mazzic got out of his seat and sauntered over the kitchen. He really did have a certain Han Solo-ish swagger to his stride, aged but confident.

Luke exhaled and settled back in his seat with visible relief.

"Well," Mara said, "It's a start, whatever it is."

Ben glanced at his father. "Dad, that was pretty wizard."

"Wizard?" Luke blinked. Mara stifled a laugh.

"I mean, you guys handled him well. Bargaining. Bluffing. Talking him down. That's not the kind of stuff they teach the kids at Jedi Academy."

"You don't *go* to Jedi Academy," Mara reminded him. "How often does *Jacen* do this kind of stuff?"

If she was laying some trap for him, trying to find an excuse to pull him away from his mentor, he didn't

sense it. He said honestly, "Just a little. But I can always learn more."

"That's my boy." Mara ruffled the top of his head.

"Ow, mom, the hair." He patted it back down.

By then Mazzic was on his way back. One had was grasping a bottle by the neck and the other had four glass rumbled, lightly clanking between his fingers. He set the tumblers on the table and looked down at Ben.

"So, kid," he said, "You want some?"

Before Ben could even think of a response, his mother said, "Just pour three, Mazzic."

The smuggler shook his head in mock disappointment. "Whatever you say, mama bear. Whatever you say."

CHAPTER SEVEN

It droned over the cabin's speakers, a female voice with a crisp Hapan accent: "Proximity Alert. Approaching Krizlar Station. Proximity Alert. Approaching Krizlar Station. Proximity Alert..."

Jacen would have given anything to kill that damed voice and never move from where he was now. The queen's cabin on *Teneniel* was plain and functional, so unlike her quarters on Hapes, and its bunk was barely big enough for the two of them to press together. Jacen squeezed his eyes shut and held Tenel Ka around the waist with both arms, as though that would keep her from getting up. He felt her shoulder-blades and the muscles of her back, smooth yet firm, slip against the bare skin of his torso. She pulled away, but he didn't let go.

"Please, Jacen," she said, and he had to relinquish.

It took effort to open his eyes. He hadn't wanted to leave Tenel Ka's bed for obvious reason, but he also realized now how badly he needed sleep. He'd gotten none on either voyage to or from Hapes.

He sat up in the bed and tossed the cover aside. He watched Tenel Ka put on a plain gray jumpsuit, vest, and utility belt, admiring her figure and the ease with which she could do everything with only one arm. She didn't even call the Force for guidance, but that didn't

surprise him. She had always valued self-sufficiency. He had wondered whether, deep down, a part of her hadn't actually savored losing the arm, just because it presented her with a new challenge.

When she was clothed she turned around, tilted her head, and asked curiously, "Are you planning to sneak onto the station like that? Because it may raise people's attention."

Jacen chuckled and moved for his clothed. "See. You *have* grown a sense of humor."

"Perhaps." Her lips remained in a firm line. "However, I wish we'd had time to prepare more."

"We have a plan. We went over it before leaving." He pulled up his pants, threw on his shirt.

"It would have helped to review it. This meeting cannot be treated lightly."

"I know." Jacen stood up and touched the side of her face. "Believe me, Tenel Ka, I won't let anything happen to Allana's grandfather."

She nodded. Her face had the same determined expression he'd known for fifteen years.

They gathered their things and went to the cockpit. Their ship had reverted to realspace and sat on the other edge of the Krizlar System and remained there, thrusters down. Jacen could see the dim glow of the red dwarf primary with his naked eyes.

"Are your cousins here?" Jacen asked as he settled into the copilot's seat.

Tenel Ka checked her console. "Indeed. They are awaiting our signal."

"Well, if they're good to move in, so are we. Right?"

Tenel Ka exhaled. He couldn't see tension on her face, but he felt it in the Force. He asked, "Do you feel your father? Is he there?"

"I do not know," she said quietly, like an admission of guilt.

"Only one way to find out," Jacen said.

"Fact," said Tenel Ka, and she fired the engines.

Krizlar Station was the only thing of note in the entire system. Nobody remembered quite how the station came to be in the first place, and its history dated far back into the Old Republic. That showed, inside and out. Krizlar was a mess of different modules and subsections all tacked together, built and rebuilt again and again over the generations. One of its many strange aspects was that it had no private hangar bays. There were several large, public ones but the only way for a craft to dock privately, away from other beings' prying eyes, was to attach to an umbilical extending from the hull.

Teneniel connected to one of these cofferdams. Tenel Ka came out the airlock alone, then sealed it tightly behind her. Jacen was going to be helping her separately, in his own way. She paused as the far side of the cofferdam to touch his mind, very lightly. She felt his strength and certainty and was glad of it, because she direly needed some of her own now.

She looked herself over: vest, belt, kit, Rancor-tooth lightsaber dangling from her belt. Enough to mark her as a Jedi, but not a Hapan Queen, unless somebody already *knew* she was a Hapan Queen. All in all, the way she preferred it. She may have left Luke Skywalker's Order so that she could serve her people, but she still thought of herself as Jedi first and Queen second, even if the rest of the universe thought otherwise.

The rest of the universe save Jacen, of course.

She resisted the urge to touch him once more and went out into the tangled, ancient guts of Krizlar Station.

The message from her father's kidnappers had explained everything about when, where, and how the meeting would happen. It had even included a detailed

holo-map of Krizlar's labyrinthine insides and a marking of where exactly the meeting would take place. Tenel Ka had studied the map intently before leaving Hapes, and she thought she'd committed every step to memory. She wished she'd had a little more time to study before disembarking, though she'd never have traded that time with Jacen.

Krizlar was strange in that there were few broad, open spaces for markets or public gatherings. She wandered through narrow, low-roofed corridors lined with stalls and shops. Alien beings from races even she had never seen hawked goods she'd never imagined. Being locked in the palace on Hapes left her feeling out-of-touch with the larger universe, and were her father's life not on the line, she would have wandered and explored all the galaxy had to offer.

But her family was more important than her freedom, so she followed the path that had been laid out. She stayed alert with the Force at all times, resisting the urge to reach out to Jacen and focusing on the strange beings around her. She'd put on a cloak before leaving the airlock and thrown a hood over her head. She kept her head bowed low, face into shadow, and most of the aliens barely looked at her. That, too, was so very different from being queen, and very welcome.

Twice she had to duck into a side alley, take out her data-recorder, and examine the map. After the second time, she was able to find a clear path all the way to the meeting room. When she arrived at the entry to the chamber she checked her chrono. She was just in time.

She reached out with the Force and felt a single presence inside the door: focused, impatient. One man was all they had agreed upon. She touched the entry key and the door slid open.

The chamber was round, with a low domed ceiling. The walls were rough, like they'd been carved from

space rock. The floor, however, was pure durasteel, and her boots clanged on its surface as she walked toward the center. She stopped three meters away from the man waiting for her.

She could tell he wasn't Hapan from the dark tattoo curving like a scythe beneath his right eye; no Hapan man would disfigure himself like that. He had short-cropped brown hair and an equally trim beard. His skin and eyes were pale. He wore a brown jacket, mid-calf boots, dark trousers, and a belt heavy with a pistol on either hip. He was indistinguishable from a hundred other spacers on this station, and while she could not peer deeply into his mind with the Force, she sensed that the appearance belied the man.

Somehow, Tenel Ka was disappointed, but she reminded herself that a man like this was a servant, not the master who had manipulated Lady Vantar and orchestrated the kidnapping of her father.

The man looked at her carefully and didn't speak. She said, "I am impressed you found a private room."

The man raised a dark eyebrow. "Is that a joke? Your reputation suggests that's not your style."

"You know who I am, then. Your master is well-informed."

The man shrugged casually. "I guess. I've never met him myself."

"Did you kidnap my father? Personally?" She gave her voice the imperious chill she'd perfected over the past ten years.

The man wasn't cowed. "I was part of the mission, yeah. But I'm not telling you who planned the whole thing because I don't even know."

"Where is my father now?"

"You know I can't tell you that."

"But do you know where he is? Or does your master hide *that* from you too."

"I know where your dad is."

"Very well, mister- Ah. I'm sorry. You know my name, but I don't know yours."

She was hoping to pick something off his surface thoughts, but this man was focused and definitely not weak-minded. He said, "Call me Mr. D, if you like."

"Very well, Mr. D. Can you at least tell me if my father is on this station?"

A very slight pause. "He is."

It was not a big admission. It would take every single woman in the Hapan Security Forces a week to comb every chamber of ancient Krizlar Station.

"I'll tell you where he is right now," the man said. "If you give me what I want."

Slowly, Tenel Ka reached into her breast pocket. She took out a small tube, translucent, filled with a sample of her daughter's blood.

"Your child's?" the man asked.

She nodded. She held out her hand, palm-up, and plucked the tube with the Force. It drifted across the room, into Mr. D's waiting hands.

He held it carefully in one hand and grinned at her. "You know, I've never seen that before. I've never seen *any* Jedi before. A lot of people, especially on the raggedy edge of things, they think you people are myths. Well, myths, frauds, or some kind of con game."

Mr. D might have been toying with her, but she also sensed an honesty in his words. "That was no con," she said steadily.

His smile went away. "Where is *your* vial, Your Highness?"

She reached into her pocket again and took out another syringe. This one had the needle still drawn.

A smile threatened on the man's flat lips. "Do you need help with that?"

"No," she said, and stuck the needle into the base of her neck. It hurt more than a stick in the arm, but she wanted the man to trust her and see that she was taking the sample through exposed skin.

She pulled it out a moment later. The needle clattered silently the floor. She held out her hand and levitated the second vial across the room, where her counterpart took it eagerly.

"You know, we expected you to just do a holo-recording of you taking a sample, then have an agent deliver it."

"I do not put my father's life in the hands of others."

"That's admirable," he said, and seemed to mean it.

He pocketed both vials, then drew something from one of the pouches on his belt. It resembled a datapad, but was larger, and it had a small nozzle on one side. Awkwardly gripping the pad with one hand, he took out Tenel Ka's blood sample and jammed the vial's tip into the nozzle. He waited a moment, removed it, and put Allana's sample in the same place.

"Are you an experienced geneticist?" she asked.

He chuckled. "Your Majesty, I am just doing what they told me to."

She didn't think she'd be able to glean much from his surface thoughts, but it was worth a shot. "How did they tell you to do it?"

"Oh, they showed me when I met them in person. *Them* isn't the big guy, you understand. Layers and layers, that's how people operate on the fringe."

He made the admission so easily. She tried to sense some memory of what they looked like or how they acted, but again, nothing.

"Well," he said, "I am not master geneticist, but it's looking like how it's *supposed* to look. So I was told, anyway."

"I'm glad," Tenel Ka said evenly, though she knew she might have handed over Allana's death warrant. "Where is my father?"

Mr D still held the datapad with one hand as he took a small spherical device from his vest. He held it out on his flattened palm like an offering.

Without moving, Tenel Ka picked the device up with the Force and levitated it toward her. It was halfway across the room when she recognized, with some relief, a portable holo-projector.

As it came to rest in her hand, she said, "You are *not* leaving here until my people have located my father."

"Oh, I'm aware of that," Mr D said. "I'm in no rush."

She turned the projector on. It was another map of Krizlar Station, and a red marker pointed out a labeled section, deck, and chamber number. By now she was familiar enough with its twisted geography to know that her father, if he was there, was located in a cargo hold very far from her location, but actually quite close to where Trista and Taryn had docked their freighter.

Tenel Ka balled her hand around the sphere, reached into her hood and tapped the small audio transceiver tucked inside her ear.

"Nova, are you there?" she asked.

"Right here, Dragon," Trista's voice was crisp and clear. "Sitrep?"

"Section B12, Deck 14, Chamber 57-A. Go now."

"Copy. Nova out."

After that, all she could do was wait. She stood with her arm stiff at her side, watching Mr. D as he stuffed the reader-pad into his pouch. He crossed his arms over his chest, rotated one shoulder, then the other, and finally stretched his neck.

In another circumstance, with another man, Tenel Ka would have tried to probe him with more questions, but she knew it was all useless again him. She reached out

to Jacen and found his presence slightly muted but very concerned. She tried to relay some of her own tentative confidence: So far, everything was going according to plan. She found that confidence reflected back with Jacen's strength; the strength of a man who had lost his brother, undergone prison and torture by the Yuuzhan Vong, been left for dead and finally come back wiser and stronger than ever.

It was awful to think that they must soon part again.

A steady voice came in her ear: "Package retrieved."

Her thought went dry. She swallowed and said, "Condition, Nova?"

The tiny pause froze her breath. Then Trista said, "Drugged and groggy, but okay."

Relief must have shown on her face. Mr. D smiled and said, "I believe our business is complete."

She fixed a cool gaze on him. "Yes. I believe we part ways here."

He didn't move. Neither did she. Both were expecting the other to pull a parting trick.

Finally, the man said, "Well, it's been nice. First time I've met a Jedi *or* a royal before, so you've really made my day. Well, I hope I never see you again, Your Highness."

"Likewise," she lied.

Mr D nodded, spun on his heel, and walked with controlled haste out of the chamber. She didn't move after him, only reached out with the Force and gave Jacen a gentle nudge. Then she turned and went out the way she came. As soon as the door closed she cast off her robe and sprinted for her father,

The rest was up to Jacen.

Placing a tracking device on Mr. D was easy. Hapan techs had stuck one on the inside of Tenel Ka's blood sampling vial before they left the palace. It was a nano-

transmitter and only good for short range, but it was enough for Jacen to track the target through Krizlar Station's tangled insides. The tracker was synced with an interior map of the station, and Jacen was able to watch the man's progress through the heads-up-holo of his zero-gravity suit as he maneuvered across the station's outer hull.

The zero-grav suit was well-equipped with directional thrusters and a variety of electronic and manual tools. If Jacen wanted to, he could have jetted away from the station's surface and flown back again, or he could have fired up a directional torch and cut deep into the hull. Right now, all he wanted to do was track his target.

He followed the marker on the station map and determined that, as they'd expected, he was heading for a ship berthed at one of the private airlocks. This one was located at a different airlock bank from *Teneniel*, which meant Jacen had to hurry to get there. Krizlar Station was massive and its surface was an angular patchwork, with different sections of the station sometimes rising like monoliths out of broad metal plains. Even with the directional thrusters it would have been impossible for an ordinary being to transverse its surface in enough time to catch the target before he arrived at his ship, ran launch preparations, and departed.

Thankfully, Jacen was not an ordinary being. He was able to use the Force to amplify his movements, and with no gravity or air resistance to speak of it was shockingly easy to carry himself broad distances with the help of only a little burst of thrust. Nonetheless, it was physically exhausting work to keep the chase up for more than a few minutes, as he was panting and sweating in his vac-suit as he half-watched the tracking holo and half-watched his surroundings.

He reached the docking bank from the outside shortly before Mr. D reached it from the inside. Climbing

across the station's surface, he stared out at the row of spaceships jutting away from the hull. He saw a disc-shaped YT-model freighter almost as old as his father's, some Incom shuttle that looked like an oversized T-47, a boxy model he didn't recognize, and a heavily-modified *Gamma*-class shuttle had had probably carried Imperial commandos twenty years ago.

He ducked his body low to the surface to minimize the small chance of his being spotted. He checked the tracker-holo and saw that his target would be entering his ship within a minute.

Still panting, he tapped on his comlink and said, "Dragon, this is Loner. Over."

Tenel Ka's reply was prompt. "What's your location?"

"At the garage." He reached out to Tenel Ka in the Force and felt relief. "How's the package?"

"The movers have it secured."

"Garage is opening. What should I do?"

There was a pause, longer than he'd expected. They'd discussed their options before leaving Hapes. If Tenel Ka was confident that her counterpart in the exchange was behind the kidnapping, Jacen was to disable his ship, or barring that, destroy it. If not, Jacen was to place a tracking device and help track the messenger to his boss.

Privately, Jacen had wondered whether it would be safer just to destroy the ship, the enemy agent, and the DNA samples with a few choice stabs of a lightsaber. From the lingering pause, he guessed Tenel Ka might be considering that too.

But she said, "Keep an eye on it, Loner."

"As you command, Dragon. Loner out."

Jacen switched off the link and checked his tracer. According to his readings, the target was entering the YT-series freighter through its cofferdam.

Jacen gave himself a small boost across the surface of the station. He kicked in the thrusters and shot out into open space, toward the Incom shuttle on the YT's starboard flank. The YT, like the *Falcon*, had a cockpit protruding from the starboard side of its main disc, and from a perch on the Incom shuttle he didn't think he'd be visible.

He landed on the Incom and jarred the shuttle only slightly in its berth. He crept across the shuttle's back, knelt down on one knee for purchase, and primed the small rocket launcher on his right wrist that would propel the tracking device onto the freighter's hull, where it would magnetize and cling unnoticed by the ship's crew.

The force of the firing rocket jerked his arm back, but the projectile shot true. Its miniature thrust engines flared for just a second before they, too, broke apart, leaving the tracking device to glide through space without artificial propulsion. He could barely see the tracker's metal surface glinting in starlight before it slapped onto the freighter's hull.

He checked the scanners on his suit and saw that the tracker was, indeed, broadcasting on the special encoded frequency it had been programmed with. *Teneniel* would be able to follow this signal halfway across the galaxy.

Tentatively, Jacen reached out with the Force to see how many crew members were onboard. That knowledge could be very valuable when they caught up with it, wherever it was heading. He sensed one mind, feeling vaguely satisfied, and another beside it. This awareness was controlled, cold, and-

He shuddered and dropped his body flat against the Incom's surface. He crawled awkward as a lizard across its hull until he was on its starboard side, fully hidden from view of the YT.

Less than a minute later, the freighter rocketed into space on a broad pulse of blue light. Jacen peeked over the Incom's side to watch it go, but even staring at its luminous back he felt, irrationally, like he was being watched.

For just a second, that second mind had touched his own in the Force.

He lay sweating and nauseous on the sofa in the cargo hold of the freighter *Red Kiss*: Isolder, Prince of Hapes, son of the late Ta'a Chume, widow of Teneniel Djo, father of Queen Mother Tenel Ka, grandfather of Allana, one-time suitor of Princess Leia and even friend to a begrudging Han Solo. Tenel Ka stood over her father's prone form feeling relieved and grateful that he was alive, but also pathetically helpless that she couldn't do more for him. Taryn was giving him water while Trista was running a medical test on a blood sample they'd taken quickly. She plugged it into a device that looked quite similar to the one Mr. D had used just minutes ago.

"What can you tell me?" Tenel Ka demanded as she watched Taryn hold her father's head back and pour water down a mouth opened for incoherent moans.

"They pumped him full of drugs all right," Trista frowned as her gray eyes darted back and forth over the readout. "Heavy sedatives, some hallucinogenics. I'm betting they kept him well and drugged the whole time he was captive."

"Will he recover?"

"I'm not reading any *unusual* drugs, just a lot of them. He should be fine after that pass naturally, but that may take a while."

"Will food help him?"

Her father's head rolled to one side and he coughed a few specks of vomit onto Taryn's shirt. To her credit, the woman didn't flinch, though the sight made Tenel

Ka feel sick. She'd long known her father as a man of decency, strength, and fortitude, and it pained her to see him rendered helpless and pathetic.

Suddenly a voice buzzed in her ear. "Dragon, this is Loner. I'm knocking on your back door."

"Are you outside *Red Kiss*?"

"Ventral airlock. May I come in?"

"Of course!" she said, and rushed down the hallway to let Jacen inside.

It took him several minutes to cycle through the airlock into the pressured section of the freighter and emerge from his bulky zero-grav suit. Tenel Ka led him to the cargo hold, where Taryn was wiping more chunks of vomit from her father's chin.

She felt Jacen's alarm and saw it on his face. "Is he going to be all right?"

"With time, yes," Trista nodded. "It's going to take him a long time to get all these toxins out of his system."

"What can you do for him onboard *Kiss*?"

"We can clean him and pump him with fluids." Taryn stood up and tossed the dirty rag on the nearest table. "The doctors on Hapes will have counter-toxins."

"Sounds good," Jacen nodded and touched Tenel Ka's arm. "I've placed the tracker on the guy's ship. We can go after him whenever you're ready."

She saw Taryn and Trista open their mouth to object and raised her hand. "My father must be given proper medical treatment as soon as possible. I entrust him to your care as I would no one else."

"We appreciate that, Your Majesty," Taryn said, "But I really think it's—"

"What? Safest? Smartest? Whoever they are, they still have my daughter's blood sample, and my own."

The twins looked reluctant but said nothing. They knew their cousin well enough not to argue.

"I'll protect Tenel Ka with my life," Jacen assured them, and he gave her arm a squeeze. "We'll complete the mission safely, I promise."

Trista and Taryn exchanged wary looks. Behind them, Isolder coughed once more. Tenel Ka saw her father's eyes flutter open and she bent down on one knee to cautiously touch his face. It was slick with sweat and his eyes were bloodshot, but they rolled toward her face and found focus there.

"Hello, father. You're all right now. We've rescued you."

"That's... my daughter." He gave a weak smile.

"We'll get you back to Hapes. You'll be all right, father."

"Who... did this?"

"We don't know."

Behind her, Trista asked, "Do you remember anything about your captors?"

Isolder's head wagged back and forth. "No. Remember... beard... horns... ugly... red and black... red and black..."

"He's still delirious," Jacen said gently. She knew he looked on Isolder as a father-in-law and could hear the hurt in his voice.

"We'll take care of him." Taryn placed a hand on her cousin's shoulder. "If you two are going, you should go now."

"Agreed." Trista sounded resigned. "Good luck, Your Majesty."

As she rose to her feet, Jacen said, "There's no such thing as luck, just the Force."

"All right." Trista looked like she was pondering a foreign phrase. "May the Force be with you, then."

"I should hope so." Tenel Ka nodded. "Come, Jacen. We must hurry."

It was a long walk back into Krizlar Stations' bowels and out again, and it took effort not to break into a run. Even at a quick walking pace it took an interminable fifteen minutes to reach *Teneniel*. They set down in the cockpit and immediately got to work. Tenel Ka began running pre-flight checks and commed the station to withdraw the cofferdam. Jacen, meanwhile, calibrated the tracking system to locate their quarry.

"Do we have a location, Jacen?" Her voice was tense. Seeing her father safe but damaged had made her more anxious, not less.

"Kind of. Looks like he's in hyperspace now. I'm trying to plot a vector and see if I can guess their location." Jacen bit his lip.

As the docking tunnel retracted, Tenel Ka fired the thrusters and kicked her ship away from Krizlar Station. The ugly, tangled facility began to shrink slowly in her forward viewport.

"Computer's got a projection," Jacen said. "But it doesn't seem right."

"Are they headed for a star system?"

"Looks like, but no place I've ever heard of. The computer's calling it the Kal'shikar system."

"Kal'shikar?" She frowned. "I am unfamiliar."

"Me too, and I've really been places. Computer says medium-sized star, one habitable planet..."

"Then we set course for Kal'shikar. Wherever and whatever that is."

Less than one minute later, hyperspace blurred into being around them as they catapulted themselves into the unknown.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Ben leaned forward, anxious and alert, as *Jade Shadow* dropped out of hyperspace. His mother was in the pilot's chair again, his father in the seat next to her. Ben was stuck behind them, and once again his clunky foot, still in its cast, kept banging against the back of Luke's chair. According to the doctors on Coruscant, he only had a few more days before he should be fully healed. Personally, he wanted to tear the thing off right now.

He tried to put the distraction out of his head and focus on the planet filling their viewport. Even if he hadn't heard about it from Mazzic, he could tell the planet was a sick one. He noted two connected northern continents and one southern one, all colored a sort of dirty gray-brown. White snow clung to the poles and the dusty red of deserts spread around the equator. Clouds, steel-gray instead of white, drifted over large swathes of the surface. The planet's oceans looked uniformly dark, as though someone had poisoned them with some chemical spill.

"Just like Honoghr," his mother muttered.

"I wonder if the same kind of ship crashed," Luke said.

Mara looked over her scanners. "It might not have *just* been a ship. Surface scans are showing lots of impact craters. Probably from orbital turbolaser blasts. Looks

like somebody was concentrating on very specific areas. Cities, or ground bases.”

“This was a Separatist redoubt, right?” Ben asked. “That means the Empire was the one who did the bombing. Or the Republic. When did this happen again?”

“Right *after* the Republic became the Empire,” Mara said grimly as she checked her scanners for any signs of life on the surface or vessels in orbit.

When he'd studied the Clone Wars, Ben had always found it a confusing conflict. The war his parents had fought in was easy to understand: the oppressive Empire had been ruled by a brutal Sith, and the Jedi and the Rebel Alliance liberated the galaxy. When he thought about the Yuuzhan Vong War (the one he thought of as belonging to Jacen and Jaina and their friends) it was much the same. The Jedi and the Alliance prevailed against the genocidal invaders. All in all, those were clear-cut, good-versus-evil conflicts.

The Clone Wars was a lot trickier to figure out. His grandparents had fought for the Republic, yes, but the Republic at that point was just a tool callously used by a Sith Lord. The Separatists did many evil things, but when the Republic won, it became an Empire and did many *worse* things. Even the Jedi themselves had been put in command of what was essentially a slave army, and he'd heard Jacen wonder aloud whether the Jedi Order's moral degeneration hadn't clouded their ability to use the Force and left them blind and open for Palpatine's betrayal.

Of course, Jacen was always quick to criticize the Jedi Order, old or new. Ben imagined his father would say differently, but now wasn't the time to ask.

So instead he commented, “It's pretty amazing how quick the Republic turned into the Empire, huh? It must have been weird for all the people on the ships. Not the

clones, but the normal soldiers who just signed on for a job, or to keep their families safe.”

His parents didn't even look at him. Their eyes just snapped to each other, and Ben felt something gave pass between them in the Force.

“What? What is it?” he asked. “What did I say?”

His mother swallowed. “Something... very wise, Ben.”

“Oh.” He blinked. Normally you said that sort of thing as a compliment, but neither of his parents looked very happy.

Before anyone could break the awkward silence, Mara's sensors did it for them. Something beeped, and a red light flashed on her console.

“What is it?” Ben leaned forward. His cast clunked against his dad's chair. “That didn't sound good.”

“It's a proximity alert,” Mara scowled. “Something's coming up from the planet. It's heading right towards us.”

“A ship?” Ben squinted at the ugly planet. He thought he saw a few points of light.

His father was checking the scanners too. “I'm not getting any life signs. Could be missiles.”

“I'm putting up forward shields,” Mara said.

“I see them!” Ben stabbed a finger forward. At least a half dozen tiny red flares were arcing toward them against the planet's backdrop.

“Hold on boys,” Mara said, and took her ship's throttle in both hands. Ben was suddenly thrown back in his seat and the planet fell out of their viewport. Mara snapped the ship into a roll and Ben was thrown in another direction.

“Crash webbing!” Mara shouted. “Now!”

Bursts of red plasma flashed outside their cockpit Lasers. It had to be lasers. Starfighters. But no life signs.

“Droids?” Ben squawked as he fumbled for his support belt.

"Looks like," Mara said. She pulled on the throttle again and the planet swung back into view. The ship shook violently under the impact of enemy fire and alarm klaxons started wailing in the cockpit.

"One engine down," Mara grimaced.

"Shields at fifty percent," Luke said. "Mara, we have to get out of here. *Now*."

"Hold on, farmboy," she grimaced. "Lightspeed's down. Need another plan."

Kal'shikar quickly filled the viewport. Mara sent the ship into a downward twirl, and red laser blasts whipped past their cockpit and fell toward the planet below.

"Are you buckled?" Mara shouted over the alarms.

"I'm in," Luke said, surprisingly calm.

"Ben!" she snapped, "Are you in!"

"I'm in!" His hands formed claws on his armrests.

"I don't think we can make it in time," Mara grimaced.

"Wait," his father said, "You can-"

There was another explosion. *Jade Shadow* fell into a downward spin. The planet rushed closer and closer. Ben was tossed like a toy against his restraints, tossed so hard it felt like his chest would be crushed.

Then there was another hit, and he blacked out.

When Paks Veem had first seen Ka'lshikar, his reaction had been one of barely-restrained disappointment. It was a generally miserable planet. The air was thin, and the habitable twilight zone windy and chill. The soil was entirely contaminated, and the only plants that grew were brittle grasses and gnarled trees that pocked out of the rocky mountain ranges. The deserts around the equatorial band were growing wider every year, and in just a century they might cover the whole surface. The cities had been destroyed and backwards savages lurked in the hills. The only thing that could be remotely considered valuable, best he could tell, were a

pair of ancient Clone Wars era ships, one Republic and one Trade Federation, that had crashed-landed on the northwest continent. Even those could hardly be considered a prize; the galaxy was littered with trash from different wars, and there had been two big ones since those ships had been considered top-of-the-line.

For his part, Paks Veem had long had a general aversion to things military. He'd been too young for the first of those big wars and for the second he'd made a point to stay out of the way. Unlike a lot of smugglers and fringe types, he'd never joined the Peace Brigade; some small twinge of lingering conscience kept him from handing over Jedi to the Yuuzhan Vong to be tortured or sacrificed. Instead he'd run as fast as he metaphorically could to the opposite end of the galaxy.

First he'd ended up in Hutt Space, and when Hutt Space fell he fled all the way to Eriadu. For better or worse, the Vong hadn't gotten a chance to bio-form that industrial hellhole, and Veem had spent the rest of the war there. When the fighting finally stopped he ventured out into the new Galactic Alliance and started making a name for himself as an information dealer, buying and selling knowledge and services. He'd never directly handled any of the spice or weapons, which had kept him off the Alliance's radar, until now. Now, things were getting interesting.

He'd had half a mind to turn around and walk away from the deal, but what his client was offering was more than what he'd ever been paid before. So he swallowed his disgust and hesitation and did what he was told, on Ord Mantell and Coruscant and a dozen other planets including, every now and then, Kal'shikar itself. Every time he'd come here he'd wondered if any of the old Nemoidian battle droids, stashed for nearly sixty years aboard their racks in their crashed command ship, even worked.

Now, as he stood on the surprisingly clean white deck that had once been a command bridge, he had to admit he was impressed with the job Dorcan and his employers had done with them.

When the unidentified ship had appeared in orbit, six sleek little droid fighters had shot out of the ship's one operable hangar bay. The port semicircular arm of the Trade Federation ship had been smashed into the side of a mountain during its crash, and most of its droids were lost, but the starboard arm had made it through intact, and it looked like its droids hadn't been damaged in either the crash or during their years of neglect.

"I'm impressed," He said to the woman standing next to him. "I mean, I didn't really expect them to fly again, after all this time."

Dician didn't reply at first. She was watching the tactical holo in the center of the bridge intently. The holo flickered frequently, but it still showed the six fighters as blue markers entering lower orbit on a vector to meet the incoming ship.

"I've never seen one of them before," Neev Alsok said from Dician's other side. The Omwati was stroking his blue chin as he watched the display. He'd spent the whole flight to Kal'shikar complaining that Veem had put the Jedi on his trail, but actually getting to the planet and getting a chance to work had seemed to calm him down. Veem was glad, because brilliant geneticist or no, the man could be a *horrible* whiner.

"They look almost like TIE Interceptors," the Gran supplied. "Except smaller. Sleeker. And they have long red eyes instead of cockpits."

Dician blinked and looked at Alsok, then at Veem, like she was just remembering her clients were there. Her skin was darkly tanned and pale tattoos seemed to writhe across her face like vine clusters, giving her a certain exotic look Veem hadn't been expecting from a

client who'd offered as much money as she had. Whoever *her* boss was, he-she-or-it was certainly well-off.

"We've made some repairs in case this situation arose," Dician said evenly.

There it was, that *we* again. Veem knew better than to ask any more about that *we*. Alsok had displayed surprising good sense and refrained from asking too, though he was clearly as curious about his employer as Veem was.

"Has this happened before?" Alsok asked.

Dician shook her head.

"*Never?*" Veem had to ask. "No ship has even peeked at this world?"

"Not since we recovered it," Dician pointed a finger at the holo.

Veem and Alsok watched as the droid fighters began firing on their target. The intruding ship seemed to dive toward the planet, though where it thought it could escape to, Veem didn't know.

"Can we get a readout on the intruder?" Alsok asked.

"We are recording now," Dician said.

She tapped a few buttons on the holo console and a second image sprung up, smaller than the main display and tucked in the bottom-left corner. It showed a flat image of what Veem first took to be static. Then he saw flashes of white and the curve of the planet and realized it must have been the visual feed from one of the droids.

The recording droid settled on the aft of the ship and began pumping lasers into its engines. It was a wide ship of a make Veem didn't recognize, and he was good with ships. Almost like a SoroSuub, but not quite. It had two engines extending from short wings on either side, and two more long airfoils extending like tent-flaps from the dorsal point of the ships and slanting down-

ward. These, too, were capped with engines. Veem saw the lower right one explode, then the upper left.

Suddenly Dician spun around. She half-ran over to another console, the one from which she'd summoned the droid fighters. Veem watched the main holo, confused, as the droid fighters pulled away from the ship and vectored back toward the command ship.

"I don't understand." Alsok frowned, like he'd found some weird puzzle in the lab. "You could have destroyed that ship."

"It's still going to crash." Veem pointed at the holo.

With two engines down, the ship was already falling into the atmosphere. It would probably be able to make some kind of controlled landing in some inhospitable mountain range, but that was just condemning the crew to a long slow death instead of a quick one.

"They'll survive," Dician said. She actually sounded pleased.

"I'm sorry, but what was the point of all that?" Veem asked. "Why did you let them live?"

Dician regarded him like she was decided what to tell him. For some reason it made him feel like an amoeba under a microscope.

"I have seen that ship before," she said finally. "Not with my own eyes, but it is impossible to mistake, because there is only one like it in the galaxy."

"Well, who does it belong to?"

"The two most powerful Jedi in the galaxy," Dician said simply. "Mara Jade and Luke Skywalker."

Even Alsok gaped. Veem managed to say, "Luke Skywalker? We just shot down Grand Master *Luke-kriffing-Skywalker*?"

"Or his wife," Dician said, like she was wondering which she'd prefer to meet.

Alsok spun on Veem. "The Jedi followed you *here*? I can't believe you did this! This is all *your* fault!"

"My fault?" Veem blinked all three eyes.

"You! You're the... Jedi drop-out or whatever. I'm just a scientist! I didn't do anything to put *Jedi* on my tail!"

"Don't worry," Dician said calmly. "We'll make sure he's all right."

Veem didn't know what was worse, killing Luke Skywalker or saving him. He'd never trained under the legend himself. He'd mostly been under Dorsk 82, dead in the Vong War, which had stung Veem more than expected when he'd found out. Still, Luke Skywalker had been a overwhelming presence that no being could ever forget on Yavin 4.

Despite hating his time at the Academy, he had never been able to hate Skywalker himself. From everything Veem had gathered he could be self-righteous, annoying, and so *stiff*, but there was a core of decency that Veem had to respect all the more because he had none himself. Unlike a lot of criminals, he didn't make excuses for his bad actions. His little bit of Jedi training, and maybe even his connection with the Force, made it hard to deny the immorality of helping to sell weapons and spice across the galaxy.

It didn't mean he had to *care*, though.

"Will we send out a party and rescue him?" he asked.

"With what?" Dician asked. "There are no sentient beings on this ship except the three of us."

"Send Dorcan when he gets back," Veem suggested.

"We won't need to. Luke Skywalker is a Jedi Master. He'll be the one to find us."

Veem didn't know what to say. Somehow he'd prefer either killing *or* saving Skywalker to having the old master confront him.

Alsok didn't look pleased at the idea either. His voice shook as he said, "If Skywalker comes *for* us, he's not going to be very happy."

"That's what we have a ship full of war droids for."

“He's a Jedi Master,” Veem insisted. Not just *a* Master. *The* Master. Maybe the best there's ever been. And if it's him *and* Jade...”

Dician gave them both a tight smile, and for the first time Veem felt afraid of her. He felt something from her then, a cool presence that stroked his mind as if to reassure it, though in truth it just made his fear run deeper.

This woman, this strange mysterious exotic client of his, was touching him with the Force.

“What... are you?” He stuttered. Alsok look at him, confused. He'd felt nothing and Veem envied him for it.

Dician's touch left him as suddenly as it had come. The woman gave him a polite smile and said, “What am I, Paks Veem, is prepared. For anything.”

PART II
RELICS

CHAPTER NINE

Ben woke up to see a spider-web of silver light against a violet sky. He blinked once, twice. When his eyes focused he realized he was looking at a series of cracks spreading in jagged rings across the forward viewport of his mother's ship. The cockpit around him was dark save the ambient twilight glow and the winking of a few red emergency lights. He looked down at one hand, flat on his lap, and tried to move it. When he held it up it shook, or maybe his whole body was shaking.

He heard his father moan. Clarity came back. He pushed himself upright in his chair. His cast clanked against Luke's seat and it took a second to remember how he'd gotten it.

He said, "Dad? Dad, are you okay?"

"I'm okay," Luke moaned. His messy gray hair poked up from behind the headrest. When he turned his head Ben saw blood running down his cheek.

"*Dad!*" Ben shouted. "You're bleeding!"

Luke's hand went absently to his face. It came away with crimson fingertips. Luke blinked once, twice. He seemed suddenly old and fragile and weak.

"Where's mom?" Ben looked around. He could see her pilot's seat better than he could Luke's and she wasn't in it. He thought he saw red streaks on the hand-rest but in this lighting it was hard to tell.

“Right here, Ben.” He heard a voice from behind.

He tried to turn in his seat but the crash webbing held him back. With shaking hands he unhooked himself and finally turned to see his mother standing in the cockpit entryway. She had one hand on the door-frame. Her legs wobbled and she had a bandage wrapped tight as a tourniquet around the bare skin of her upper arm. The bandage was stained with blood but he didn't see any fresh wounds. Then he saw the medical kit dangling from her other hand and reached out for it. She passed it to Ben and Ben passed it to Luke, who opened it and began searching for bandages with shaking hands.

Ben pushed out of his chair. His cast scraped against the deck as he leaned against his father's chair and helped wind wrappings around his father's head. He'd taken a cut to the temple, and it was bleeding badly. He'd probably need stitches to close the wound properly but for right now bacta-bandages would have to do.

When Ben had finished giving his father a red-stained headband, the two of them collapsed back in their seats. Mara remained standing on weak legs, one hand on the threshold.

“We're alive,” Ben said. “Good. I wasn't expecting that.”

“Doubt your mom's flying, did you?” Luke said dryly.

“Well, no.” He looked over his shoulder. “Um, sorry, Mom.”

Mara's head wagged from side to side. “They pulled back. They could have blown us out of the sky but they didn't.”

“They *did* blow us out of the sky,” Ben waved a hand at the cracked viewport and the twilight sky beyond. He craned his neck, squinted, and thought he saw rocks and mountain peaks rendered violet and lavender silhouettes by the encroaching darkness.

Well, at least they'd landed in a temperate zone.

"They could have finished us off," Mara said. "Should have. Something happened."

"I'm not complaining," Ben said.

"No. Of course not. I just wish I understood *why*."

"Where *are* we, though?" Ben asked as he tried to stand again. "I see mountains, or something."

"When we were free-falling I saw something," Mara said. "I'm not sure what, but it was something artificial, stuck in these mountain ranges. I aimed for them, but I'm not sure how close we got."

"Any crash we walk away from," Luke said. "You did a good job, Mara."

"Right." She snorted. "At least I didn't total *Shadow* like my last two ships. Not sure if we can breach atmo with that broken viewport."

"Cracked, not broken," Luke said.

She scowled. "We need to check engines, shields, communications, everything."

"Communications are all in *Shadow's* nose," Ben said. "That's, um, not a good thing."

Luke leaned forward and tried to turn the communications console on. He got no lights, no sound. He tried a few more stations- weapons, engines, life support- and got nothing.

"Sithspit," Mara said. She sounded more tired than angry. She turned around without a word and walked out of the cockpit, probably to go check the rest of the ship, or maybe go outside.

Ben went after her on shaky legs. He heard his father awkwardly rise from his chair but didn't stop. The deck was slanted at a sharp angle and he had to half-walk, half-lean against the wall, which was okay by him since he wasn't totally ambulatory anyway. He went down *Shadow's* main corridor, hung a left, and was unsurprised to find his mother getting ready to open the starboard airlock.

She glanced over her shoulder. "Landing ramp's probably stuck. This should work, though."

"Mom, it might not be safe."

"All the more reason to check it out."

"Mom, you're hurt."

"I'm hurt less than you or your father." She said firmly. Even in the dim red emergency lighting he could see the concern on her face, and the motherly authority. She wanted him to stay put and shut up, for his own good.

He couldn't stand that look in normal times. Now wasn't a normal time, and a part of him said she was absolutely right, that he was in no condition to go scraping around some alien mountains.

He opened his mouth to object, shut it again. By that point his father was already in the room with them. Placing a hand on Ben's shoulder he said, "Mara, be careful out there."

"No problem, farmboy." She nodded. "See you two later."

She opened the airlock and cool air rushed in. She shivered but didn't go back for a jacket. She walked out onto the dark, craggy landscape and didn't look back.

As Luke closed the airlock behind her he said, "Don't mind your mother right now. She's angry."

"She looks tired to me. She shouldn't be out there."

"Your mother's already lost two ships that were very important to her. She doesn't want to lose another."

"Do you think we've lost *Shadow*?"

Luke went back into the hallway, and Ben followed. His father said, "Ben, you should go back into the cockpit and see if you can get the systems working I'll check the other decks and see if I can get a damage evaluation from the inside."

Ben nodded. "Okay, fine. I'll go to the cockpit."

"Thank you, Ben," his father said, then turned and walked back toward the main cargo hold. Ben fought

down a sigh and began shuffling back toward the cockpit. His cast scraped and clanged on the deck with every step.

When he got back to the cockpit he began trying to get its systems working again. He was pretty good with mechanical stuff. Not as good as his cousin Jaina, and probably not as good as his dad had been when was a kid, but still good. After five or ten minutes' work he was able to get the secondary power grid online. It wasn't enough to fire the engines and fly them out of there, but it got life support cycling and it got normal lights back on. The lights especially felt good, until he saw the red streaks of his mother's blood on the pilot's seat. He fought down the queasiness in his gut and cleaned them up carefully. Then he sat down and got to work. He was still hoping he could get sensors online so they could figure out just where they were on this Force-forsaken planet, and maybe even figure out who had attacked them.

Torches started going outside. He barely noticed them at first because he was concentrating on the diagnostics console, but at one point he looked up and saw over a dozen little flames on the mountains ringing the ship. In the dim light it was hard to tell, but he thought he saw vaguely humanoid figures with hunched shoulders and spiked backs, holding up torches with skinny overlong arms.

"Dad!" He shouted. He had no idea where his father was and he shouted again "*Dad!* The locals are here!"

He heard the distant sound of his father's motion somewhere in the ship. He had a hard time turning his attention away from the scene outside. More torches were lighting up. By the time Luke arrived there must have been more than two dozen, and those were just the ones he could see.

"Mom's out there. Where's Mom?" Ben's voice shook. He reached out with the Force and tried to feel her presence.

It flared like a nova in his awareness. She was right there, he felt her, but he couldn't see her. She was angry and she wanted these people, whoever they were, to go away.

Then she dropped down from over the cockpit. Her boots hit *Shadow's* crumpled nose soundlessly. She had her lightsaber in her hand and she held it up high. Its blazing light seemed to scare the natives; their torches bobbed and shifted, like everyone was taking a step back. None of them tried to advance. Ben watched his mother's back as she stood silhouetted against the violet sky and hoped they didn't have arrows or bows or spears; even a Jedi Master could be overwhelmed by that many primitive attackers.

The tableau seemed frozen for a moment and forever. Then another blade of light shot up into the sky. This one was in the distance. It rose from the rim of the jagged hills, behind and above the bobbing torches.

"A Jedi," his father whispered behind him. "That's a *Jedi!*"

Ben felt it too, one strong presence blazing in the Force. His parents were reaching out to it, trying to sense its intentions.

The green blade lowered but did not extinguish. The being holding it began walking down the slope, and the torch-bearing natives moved easily aside. As it passed through the torches Ben got a better look at it. It was massive Whiphid wearing layers of animal-skin robes and a conical straw hat over its head. Tusks jutted up from the tip of its long jaw and its eyes were impossible to discern. Despite its fearsome appearance, Ben did not sense any hostility from this creature. If anything, he sensed disbelief and caution.

Mara hopped off *Shadow's* nose and walked up the slope to meet the newcomer. They stepped close but did not shut down their lightsabers. Now that they were close, Ben could see how much the Whiphid dwarfed his mother.

Mara held her lightsaber to the side and extended a hand. The Whiphid regarded it, then stuck out a massive three-clawed hand. His hand enveloped Mara's, and they shook.

CHAPTER TEN

They had everything planned perfectly. *Teneniel* was trailing the old YT freighter in hyperspace, safely hidden from its sensors. From the tracking information they could estimate the time of its arrival in Kal'shikar's gravity well to within a minute. At the very start of that minute-long window, Jacen and Tenel Ka would drop out of hyperspace and fire up the ship's ion cannon. When the freighter appeared they would disable it before its crew knew what was going on, reel it in via tractor beam, and board it. Depending on what they found inside, they might also hold the ship and her crew ransom and issue demands from whomever they were to meet on the surface. From what information *Teneniel's* databanks had on Kal'shikar, Mr D's clients would probably be the only sentients being on such a wracked and inhospitable planet.

It was, both he and Tenel Ka agreed, a pretty good plan.

Jacen had been told that no plan survives first contact with the enemy. He knew it from experience. But for some reason, right then and there, he forgot.

At least, he was not expecting to drop out of hyperspace in front of a full wing of starfighters.

Before they knew what was happening their field of vision was filled with red laserfire. The small ships were

of some design Jacen didn't recognize. They almost looked like sleek, miniature TIE interceptors, and their movements reminded him of swarming insects.

"Shields up!" Tenel Ka shouted and wrenched the ship into a series of twists and turns.

It took Jacen just a second to put up the energy shields, and it was enough time for a few darts of red plasma to explode against the hull. Alarm klaxons wailed, red lights flashed, and it looked like their port engine was stalling out.

"What now?" He grimaced. Their shields could hold off these low-energy blasts for a while, but this many enemies were going to gnaw their defenses down to nothing eventually.

"I am heading for the planet," Tenel Ka said. Her face was stony and intent despite the frantic battle, despite the panic Jacen felt himself. The gray-brown sphere of Kal'shikar filled their viewport and Tenel Ka pitched their ship into a steep dive. Jacen flipped on the tactical display and saw the fighters signified by a trail of little red dots following them.

"Some kind of droid ships," Jacen grit his teeth. "Have you seen them before?"

"I am not sure. They seemed familiar."

"Kinda like TIEs, I thought. But nobody's really used droid ships since the Clone Wars."

"I believe this planet saw battle in that conflict."

"Yeah, but, those ships have to, what, sixty years old?"

"Fact. And they outnumber us twenty to one."

Red plasma started to rain on their aft shields again. Jacen put all defensive power into the rear grids and brought up the aft laser turrets. *Teneniel* was not armed with concussion missiles and quad-laser turrets like the *Falcon*, but her small automated emplacements managed to pick off one unshielded droid fighter after

another. That was almost encouraging, except for all the others still coming fast behind them.

Their ship rocked as it entered the upper atmosphere. Jacen pulled on his crash webbing and wanted to tell Tenel Ka to do the same, but she was wrestling one-handed with the controls as upper air current threatened to throw their ship into a spin.

"Where are we headed?" he asked her. "Where can we put down?"

"I am trying to tell. I see no cities. I see... Wait. Metallic materials. Ships. Crashed ships."

"Take us there."

"That may be where target is."

"Good. We can fight them head-on instead of waiting for them to find us."

"Understood. Jacen, I-"

There was another explosion as their aft shields collapsed. Jacen was thrown forward and snapped back by his restraints, but Tenel Ka was nearly impaled on her own control stick.

"Tenel Ka!" he shouted as she remained hunched over the console, head low, her one hand still gripping the throttle.

Another explosion rocked them and Jacen was thrown to one side as *Teneniel* spiraled toward a ridge of high mountains.

As they fell into Kal'shikar's twilight zone he glanced at their tactical display. Red marks flit around *Teneniel* like angry gnats while the blue mark signifying their quarry hung at the edge of the planet's orbit, safe and sound, like it was mocking them.

As they stood on the control ship's bridge, watching the holo-display as a second ship tumbled toward the planet's surface, Paks Veem said aloud, "I thought this planet didn't get many visitors."

Dician didn't seem to notice his sarcasm, which was probably for the best.

She said, "This guest was a bit different. Consider this one invited."

"And you *still* shot him down?"

"Yes. We only roll out the welcome mat for Jedi Grand Masters, not mere Jedi Queens."

"Jedi *Queens*? Jedi don't have queens."

"We have every reason to believe that ship was being used by Queen Mother Tenel Ka of Hapes. I believe she was at the Academy the same time as you. Perhaps you knew her?"

Knew *of* her was more like it. Seen her from afar, occaisionally. The red-haired warrior girl had been part of a tight circle along with the Solo kids and a few others. For most of the students, kids like Paks Veem who got picked up by chance, Tenel Ka and her clique might have well been royalty. It hadn't been shocking when he found out, years later, that she actually *was*.

"How did you know it was Tenel Ka?" he asked as he watched the ship make its terminal descent toward the planet. It was aiming for the same mountain range as the other crashed ships, which was probably not a coincidence. Outside the slow-shifting twilight band there was only freezing mountain to the west and scalding desert to the east.

"We don't know who for certain, but *some* Jedi has been tailing Dorcan ever since he met the Queen on Krizlar Station."

"*That's* who he met at Krizlar?"

Dician had sent Dorcan out suddenly a few days ago, shortly before the two of them left for Coruscant to speak to Alsok, though 'speak to' had unintentionally become 'kidnap' once the Jedi got wind of them. Dorcan, an expert smuggler and droid mechanic, had initially been brought on to fix up all the Federation toys in the

command ship's cavernous arms, but Dician had seen fit to put him to other uses too. Veem hadn't gotten a chance to talk to his friend about the mission before they split.

"Dorcan performed well, just like Alsok. You recommend good people."

"I'm glad to hear it." He grumbled as the light of the Hapan shuttle winked out. The green light indicating Dorcan's *Green-Eyed Lady* heading right for the control vessel and would be docked within minutes. Behind it, the little blue marks indicating so many droid starfighters were also returning home.

"Do you think they survived?" Veem asked. He wasn't sure which prospect he liked less, Skywalker and a Jedi queen dead, or the two of them alive and angry with him.

Dician shrugged like it didn't matter. "I'll direct a few droids to investigate. However, they are not our main concern."

Veem shook his head. This woman was infuriating in her ability to make any situation seem casual. Any other being would want to run screaming from a situation that pitted them against some of the most powerful Jedi in the galaxy. He felt like screaming himself, right now. He'd taken this job because Dician, and whoever her bosses were, offered him more money than he'd made over the past three years combined, and all they'd wanted from him was to make a few contacts and help with minor adjustments to a seventy-year-old starship computer. What had seemed like a great gig at first now seemed like the big punch line to end a life-long joke.

"Why me?" he asked suddenly.

Dician blinked in honest surprise. It was the first time he'd seen it on her.

He didn't want to sound panicky or hysterical, so he took a deep breath and said, "Why did you hire me? I've barely even done anything for you."

"You introduced us to the best geneticist in the galaxy." She paused. "The best who can be *bought* anyway. And Dorcan is also quite skilled in a variety of fields."

"But why *me*?" He jabbed a claw at his chest. "I don't understand what I bring to this."

"You are a unique individual, Mr. Veem."

Unique. That's what the Jedi at the Academy always called him, *unique*, just like told everybody else the same thing.

Somehow, it meant something different coming from her.

"By unique, you mean I can use the Force."

She nodded.

"But I'm not a Jedi!" he protested. "I'm nothing close! I'm a crappy drop-out who didn't have the patience for his lessons. I'm a con man who can barely pick up a stick with the Force."

"You are also intuitive," she said. "You can read other people well."

That was true. He normally could. This woman, however, was not just a closed book, she was a book with the covers nailed shut. It was all the more frustrating because he knew she had the Force as well.

"You never answered my question," he said. "What *are* you? You're not a Jedi, right?"

She shook her head. "No. I am not. I can touch the Force, but I'm not strong enough to become a Jedi even if I wanted to,"

"So you, what, use the Force for tricks? Like me?"

"That is one way of looking at it," she considered.

Before he could ask more fruitless questions the door to the command deck slid open. A pair of old Trade Federation battle droids marched in first on their spindly brown legs. Veem knew they could be deadly enough, but he could never understand how the skinny robots

with vaguely insectoid faces and silly mechanical voices were supposed to frightened the enemy.

Two living beings walked in behind the battle droids. The first he recognized instantly as Harl Dorcan. The two of them went back over a decade, ever since the late stages of the Vong War, and the human smuggler gave Veem his best cocky grin.

Behind him was a being Veem hasn't seen before. It was a tall Devaronian, complete with needle-like teeth and horns jutting from his forehead, dressed in a black jumpsuit and cape. That would have made him look intimidating enough, but in addition his entire face was marked in elaborate red-and-black tattoos. It made the ink job on Dician's face, already an impressive bit of art, look like a hack job.

"Oh," he bleated. "*You're* the boss?"

The Devaronian flicked golden eyes to Dician. "What have you told him?"

"Nothing essential," he said. "He's wondering if *you* are the one paying his bills."

For his fearsome appearance, the Devaronian seemed calm and nonchalant. He gave the Gran a quick look-over and said, "We all serve the same master."

"Oh. That, uh, clarifies things."

"I'm glad I had him with me." Dorcan said. "Without him, I wouldn't have known we were being tailed."

"It's a good thing you called ahead," Veem said. "We shot her down."

"Was the queen aboard?"

"We don't know," said Dician, "But I'll send droids to investigate."

"Well, she was a looker, even with one arm, so I hope she made it."

The Devaronian looked mildly annoyed with Dorcan's chatter. "The queen doesn't matter now. We have the samples we need."

"And you're sure they belong to the queen and her child?" asked Dician.

"I saw her take her own sample myself, right through the skin. As for the other one, well, it looks like her offspring," said Dorcan. He reached into his vest and took out two small vials filled with what must have been blood samples.

Dician stepped up and took one in each hand. She examined each tube and said, "Excellent. Come, Alsok can start working on these right away."

Dician walked out the main doorway and the two battle droids fell in behind her. The other three followed her down the pale gray corridors toward the laboratory.

As he walked alongside the Devaronian, careful not to step on that flowing black cape, Veem asked, "So, um, what should I call you?"

"Vidious."

That sounded about right. He decided he wasn't going to get much more out of him, and he probably didn't want to know much more anyway. For the first time in his career as an information dealer, he was starting to suspect that ignorance really was bliss.

When they reached the lab, Alsok was sitting at the desk in the center of the room going over one of his datapads. He was dressed in a plain white jacket, uniform of scientists everywhere, and looked like he could have been back home at the Valorum University Medical Center.

Instead, he was in the middle of a chamber some ten-by-twenty meters in size. The room contained a dozen large transparisteel tubes standing floor to ceiling. Each was filled with a translucent blue liquid and inside each one could be seen a floating humanoid body.

They were Spaarti cloning cylinders, first made at the end of the Clone Wars, recovered from the crashed Republic assault carrier three kilometers to the north. To

Veem, Spaarti cylinders were associated with Grand Admiral Thrawn's brief and terrifying attempt to conquer the galaxy during his childhood. Spaarti cylinders grew clones much faster than the Kaminoans did, and had been originally engineered by Palpatine as a way to quickly buff up his legions before turning Republic into Empire. Thrawn had used them for much the same purpose as he tried to inflate his own troop capacity.

When Dician had first shown him this set-up, he'd wondered what new war machine was being built. To his surprise, Dician's boss didn't seem interested in mass-producing an army of clones from a single template. Floating in each tube was a different being. In the one to the right of Alsok's desk was a human male, thin, brown-haired. To his left was a Mon Calamari female. Next to the Mon Cal was a Chagrian male.

Alsok only seemed to notice the approaching party when they were right in front of his desk. The Omwati looked up, blinked twice, and said, "Did you get the samples?"

"We did." Dician placed the tubes carefully on his desk. "Say hello to the Queen of Hapes and her child."

"Wonderful." Alsok gazed at the little blood samples like the held all the secrets of the universe. Well, maybe they did. Alsok was the scientist, so he would know.

"Pleased to meet ya," Dorcan extended a hand over the desk. "Harl Dorcan."

Alsok looked at Dorcan like he was noticing him for the first time. Then he smiled graciously, put the tubes down, and shook. "I've heard a lot about your work."

"Really?" Dorcan crossed his arms over his chest.

"Well, I've heard a little." Alsok shrugged. "That's what scientists normally say to each other."

"Well, I'm no scientist, but I do know Spaarti cylinders when I see 'em."

“Have you seen them before?”

“Just in holos. Piece of living history, isn't it?”

“Quite.” Alsok smiled a little wistfully. Then his eyes shifted and he noticed Vidious for the first time. Instead of extending a hand he said, “You must also work for my employer.”

“That's right,” the Devaronian said simply.

“This guy don't talk much, but he comes in handy,” Dorcan said. “Sensed the Jedi coming after us, for one.”

“Jedi?” Veem got an icy feeling. “How did you sense a Jedi?”

The Devaronian looked at him and said nothing, which was all the confirmation he needed.

“You're not Jedi.”

“No. I am not.”

“You guys should compare party tricks,” Dorcan said as he began to walk down the row of Spaarti cylinders. “Looks like these are coming along nicely. How long until you hatch out a new Hapan Queen?”

“Well, the typical growth cycle for a Spaarti is—” Alsok stopped. His eyes darted to Vidious, then Dician. “You know, I'm not really sure how much you want me to go on about this.”

Before they could answer, Dorcan cried from the end of the row, “Hey, is it just me or does this guy look familiar?”

Veem followed him down to the last cloning cylinder. Floating inside was a red-skinned Devaronian male. He lacked the ornate tattoos, but the facial structure itself was unmistakable.

Incredibly, Dorcan laughed. “Hey,” he called, “Does this mean I get a body-double too?”

An icy dread hit Veem's stomachs. He was an idiot for not getting it sooner, or at least when Luke Skywalker showed up.

"They're all *Jedi*," he said. "You're cloning *Jedi*. That's why you brought Skywalker here."

"Luke Skywalker was not planned," Dician said evenly. "However, he is a gift I'm not willing to turn down."

"Skywalker is *here*?" Vidious said, alarmed. It was the first emotion Veems had seen from him, and it felt appropriate, because he was pretty damned alarmed himself right now.

"Skywalker or his wife. Their ship crash-landed a few hours before you arrived."

"Did they trace your employees from Coruscant?" He said 'employees' like it was a slur.

"Quite possibly." Dician was still unphased. "I don't think he knows what we're doing here, which gives us a strong advantage. Now that our party is together, I suggest we prepare for his arrival."

"I'm no fighter," said Alsok. "I've never even picked up a blaster."

"We have a whole ship full of droids to fight," Dician said. "As for the rest of us, there's plenty of work for people of our *unique* talents."

Her eyes rested on Veem. He couldn't bring himself to break her gaze, but right then he wanted nothing better than turn his tail and run.

Pain, fire, dreaming:

He sees his daughter then, standing beside the throne. Allana is twenty, maybe thirty years older than the girl he'd left behind on Hapes, but it is Allana all the same. She has the strong chin, vivid red hair, wide cheekbones, and cool gray eyes of her mother, while there is something in her lips, in her mouth tugging toward a smile, that reflects her Solo inheritance.

She places one hand on the armored shoulder of the man next to her. That armor is rough and spiked,

organic like a Yuuzhan Vong's, yet the man behind it is clearly human. From beneath his animal mask, horned and fierce, juts a square chin, lightly traced with dark tattoos. Through the mask's twin holes are two eyes: one cool and blue, the other blazing the angry red-gold of the Sith.

Th Dark Man reaches up and takes Allana's hand in his own. A brittle smile forms on his withered lips. A slanted white grin appears on Allana's face, and she squeezes that hand with an almost daughterly affection.

Pain, fire, destiny:

It snapped, hissed, cracked, roared. Wind rushed in through the smashed-open forward viewport, feeding the flames. The light was blinding. The heat seared his flesh. He pulled off his crash webbing and lurched for Tenel Ka as *Teneniel's* cockpit threatened to explode around them.

Tenel Ka had been unable to strap into her seat before the crash, and when the impact had come she'd been thrown forward, head snapping against the console. Jacen had tried to use the Force to soften the blow, but in the frenzy of collision he` had no idea if it had worked. He took her by the shoulders and pulled her upright in her seat. Her head rolled to one side. He looked down in her lap and saw a jagged chunk of transparisteel protruding from her midsection. Red blood was already welling from the wound and spilling into her lap.

It was all he could do to pull on the Force, calm himself, push away the frenzy in his mind and the fire raging around him and *focus*.

Tenel Ka was wounded. She might even be dead. He couldn't move her safely with the shard stabbed into her gut but if he pulled it out she could bleed to death in minutes. If he didn't get her out of here in sixty seconds, they would both be charred to a crisp.

He wrapped his hand around the transparisteel. Its jagged edges cut into his palm. He pulled it out with a single tug. He was relieved to see that only a few inches of the shard were coated in blood, but he didn't inspect it for more than a second. He thrust it into the flames bursting out of the console and held it there until he could feel the heat sting his palm. Then he pulled it out and pressed the scalding-hot metal against Tenel Ka's wound.

She stirred finally, opened her mouth to cry, but her moans, pained as they were, could barely be heard over the fire. The cockpit suddenly shook, as though another explosion had taken place in the rear of the ship.

No time left. Drawing strength from the Force, Jacen lifted Tenel Ka in both arms and propelled himself out through the shattered viewport.

He landed as gently as he could. Still cradling Tenel Ka in his arms, he staggered forward as fast as he could up the slope. The light from the burning spacecraft lit the entire scene like a bonfire, and shadows danced and winked across a barren, jagged landscape.

At least there was air, he thought, as cool breath raked his lungs.

An explosion behind him threw Jacen to the ground. Tenel Ka tumbled out of his arms and lay inert on the slope. Still on his stomach, Jacen looked over his shoulder to see the high pillar of flame rising from what could barely be recognized as Tenel Ka's shuttle.

There was nothing he could do for it now. He crawled across the rocks to where Tenel Ka lay. He crawled up next to her, placed a finger on her neck, and felt the pulse. He pressed his other palm over her abdomen and tried to feel the tears in her body. In all his travels, in all his explorations of the Force, he'd never learned healing skills like those Cilghal or Tekli possessed. He'd always been concerned with the abstract questions and lofty

theories instead of the specific and the personal, and now it was going to cost the life of someone he loved.

No, he'd healed before. At the end of the Yuuzhan Vong War, when Luke had lay dying from Overlord Shimmra's toxins, Jacen had followed the example of his mentor Vergere and healed him with his own tears. That had been a matter of making chemical changes; here he had to mend broken tissue and patch broken blood vessels.

"I don't know what to do," he muttered, more terrified than he could ever remember being. If Tenel Ka died here, if *he* died here, there would be nothing to prevent his vision of Allana and the Dark Man from coming to pass. It *would* come to pass if they died here, he was sure of it.

Desperate now, he reached out with the Force in the hope of finding some signs of sentient life, knowing as he did so that it was hopeless on a world as desolate and empty as this. At first he found nothing, and then he felt something familiar, something totally unexpected.

Something unbelievable.

Then he heard something raised above the roar of the fire. It was a high, wailing noise, and after the first cry died down others rose to join it. Soon the twilight was filled with the chorus of hungry predators, inexorably drawn toward the light.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The tribe of natives still ringed *Jade Shadow*, their torches glowing in the long twilight. It was still an ominous sight, but Mara felt far better about it now that she was inside her ship. She sat in the pilot's chair again and had swiveled it to one side so she could stitch up the nasty cut on her husband's forehead. Pressure from his bandage had only partially reduced the bleeding, and the only way to stop it was to sew the skin tight together. It would heal eventually, but Luke wasn't as young as he used to be, and it would be a day or two before it was time to remove the stitches.

Assuming they were alive in a day or two.

As she stitched, she listened to the old Whiphid Jedi sitting in the chair that, an hour ago, had held her much smaller son. K'Kruhk was bigger than a Wookiee and probably even more hairy. His protruding jaw, big tusks, and three-clawed hands made him even more fearsome, though when K'Kruhk spoke his voice was soft, almost gentle.

He told his story and they listened without comment. He told how he had survived the Jedi Purge at the end of the Clone Wars, how he had spent months on the run, and how he had finally come to rest in this most unlikely of planets. He spoke of his years spent with the planet's natives, commonly called Shikari. They were a

nomadic people, ever-marching across the planet in line with its twilight division line, lest they be burned or cooked by the long hot days and long cold nights. They required little food and water, and little sleep as well. They were a straightforward, durable people, and K'Kruhk had found much to admire in the simplicity of their existence.

When Mara had finished stitching Luke's forehead and washing it clean, he told K'Kruhk, "You don't seem surprised to find us here. It's been almost sixty years since the Purge. Do you have any idea of what's happened to the Jedi since then? To the galaxy?"

"Some." His big head nodded. "The crashed assault carrier, which you may have seen from the air, retains some working technology. Not much, you understand. Its power core died decades ago and only small, localized generators provide any energy. But sometimes, when our march across the planet brings us back to these mountains, I go inside and bring up the communications system. You'd be surprised how many broadcast messages wash past a planet as remote as this."

"What have you heard?" Mara asked.

"I have heard about you, Luke Skywalker." The Whiphid held out a claw. "I have heard that you killed the Emperor and established a new Jedi Order."

"I didn't kill the Emperor," Luke said. "That was my father, Anakin Skywalker. Did you know him?"

K'Kruhk didn't answer right away. His inhuman face was very difficult to read and his emotions seemed guarded in the Force. Finally, he said, "I knew of him more than I knew him. He had a sense of mystery and portence about him. He was rumored to be the Chosen One who would bring balance to the Force, and I think that made most of us wary around him. Only a few Jedi seemed to have any personal connection with him.

Master Kenobi, of course. Master A'Sharad Hett. Jax Pavan. A few others, perhaps."

"Anakin became Darth Vader," Luke said grimly. "Have you heard that name?"

A little recognition lit in K'Kruhk's small yellow eyes. "Yes. I have heard that name. Yet you say Vader killed the Emperor?"

"Yes. As for Master Kenobi, he died fighting Vader, and saving me. I'm not familiar with the others you named."

"I am sure they are dead by now." K'Kruhk's head bowed. His wide, tusked mouth sunk against his chest.

"Have you heard about the Yuuzhan Vong?" Mara asked. "Did you know about them?"

"Yes. I know they caused great suffering."

"We lost many brave Jedi." Luke's voice was brittle. Mara could tell he was dying to ask why K'Kruhk had remained in hiding for so long despite the dire straits of the galaxy.

Diplomatically, Mara asked, "Have you ever thought of leaving this planet?"

K'Kruhk lifted his head. "I chose this path of exile. I choose it still."

Luke wasn't satisfied. "One Jedi, especially one from the Old Republic, could have a great impact. There's a great deal we can learn from you."

"I am not sure that I am a Jedi anymore. I have not felt at one with the Force in many decades."

For the first time, Mara felt the sadness coming off him. It had been sixty long years ago, longer than she'd been alive, but this old Whiphid must have undergone horrible experiences in the Clone Wars and especially the Purge. The Jedi of her generation had seen horrible losses in the Yuuzhan Vong War, but they paled in comparison to the wholesale extermination performed under Palpatine.

To her surprise, it was Luke who pressed, "Sixty years is a long time to spend in exile. I understand you must have gone through horrible experiences during the Purge, but the Jedi are alive and strong again. You have a family waiting for you."

"My family is already here." K'Kruhk gestured to the torches glowing outside the cracked viewport.

There seemed to be no budging him. She could tell just from Luke's face that he wasn't going to give up easily, but Mara decided to redirect the conversation to more practical areas. She said, "You may not want to leave Kal'shikar, but we definitely do. Ben's checking the engines right now, but I'm betting we're going to need to replace some parts before we get my ship spaceworthy again, especially if whoever shot us down wants to keep us here."

K'Kruhk gestured to the cracked transparisteel. "I doubt I can help you replace that."

"But you can take us to that crashed assault carrier. The equipment's going to be outdated, but it might still be useful. At the very least, we can use its comm system to send out a distress signal."

"That is a possibility," K'Kruhk considered. "I can take you there, if you wish."

Luke asked, "What happened to the ship you came on?"

"I set a course for the sun and jettisoned in an escape pod."

Mara found herself reluctantly impressed by the Whiphid's determination to exile himself. She also had to admit that destroying his own ship like that was a good way to keep the Empire from tracing him.

Another awkward pause lingered. She didn't sense that K'Kruhk was trying to be unhelpful. She didn't feel he had any ill intention. Mostly, he seemed like an old

hermit who just wanted to be left alone, which was more or less what he was.

"Okay," Mara said, "Let's talk about the *other* ronto in the room. We were shot down by droid starfighters from that crashed old Trade Federation command ship. Do you know anything about that?"

"I have not ever gone into that ship. I rarely go into *Pride of Chandrila*, the carrier. I don't like to revisit those times."

"Have you ever seen Federation droids active before?" She hoped they might have been operating on their ancient programming, but after all these years it was unlikely. There was almost certainly some sentient governing force within the command ship.

"I have," K'Kruhk said, "Though as I said, I pass by that area very rarely. Every few standard years."

Mara couldn't imagine such an empty existence, plodding through day after day, year after year, with no significant changes to challenges. Some Jedi were enthusiastic about the monastic lifestyle, but to her being a Jedi meant *acting* like one. If what K'Kruhk said was true, his exile had not helped his connection with the Force either.

Luke said, "I find it interesting that those ships were active now, when these mountains are in the twilight zone that humans can inhabit. I don't think it's a coincidence."

"What brought the three of you to this planet?" the Whiphid said, like it had just occurred to him to ask.

"We were helping Alliance Intelligence chase a lead," Mara said. "We were tracking a criminal with some Jedi training and heard he might be here."

K'Kruhk was silent, but she sensed he was running over something in his mind. He finally said, "I believe there may be recent activity in the Trade Federation ship."

"You've seen something? Lights on the hull, ships in the air?"

He nodded. "More than that. I have recently felt... something. Portent, premonition. I denied it at first, but I've come to believe that it was the Force telling me that something was happening on Kal'shikar."

"I think was the Force was definitely giving you a nudge," Mara said. "Might mean you're still a Jedi after all."

After another pause, K'Kruhk said, "Perhaps I am."

"Will you take us to the assault carrier?"

He nodded. "I will do that much. And I will help you search."

"We're very grateful for that," Luke said. He still wanted to take K'Kruhk back to Coruscant, that much was plain on his face, but he seemed to be holding back his pleas for now. Mara was glad for that. They needed to do this one step at a time.

They all heard the clanging of Ben's cast knocking down the hall. When he finally appeared, crutch under one shoulder and the other arm braced against the wall, three sets of eyes were on him. To Mara's surprise, he had shock and anxiety boiling off him in the Force.

"Ben, what is it?" she rose from her seat in alarm. "Is something wrong with the ship?"

"Not the ship." He wagged his head back and forth but didn't say more.

"What is it, Ben?" Luke prompted.

"It's Jacen." Ben looked like he didn't believe it himself. "Here's here, on the planet. Close by. I *sense* him."

Mara reached out with the Force, and Luke did too. Her nephew's Force aura was unique and hard to miss, especially on an empty world like this. It felt sharp but distant.

She had no idea how Jacen had gotten to this world, or why he'd come, but she could tell it wasn't time for questions.

"He's in trouble," Luke got to his feet. "We need to help him."

She glanced at him. "Your head okay, Skywalker?"

"I'll be fine. Come on, we need to go."

They started for the door, but Ben didn't budge. Mara could see the conflict in his eyes. He wanted desperately to help his cousin, but he knew he was in no physical shape to do so.

Mara put a hand on his shoulder. "Wait here for us, Ben. Hold down the fort."

Behind them, K'Kruhk asked, "Do you require my assistance?"

Mara considered for a moment, then said, "Stay here with your people. Whoever shot us down might come for this ship. *Shadow* has to be protected at all cost."

"You may rely on me."

"I'm glad." She looked back to Ben and squeezed his shoulder. "Help K'Kruhk if he needs it. We'll take care of Jacen."

With obvious reluctance, Ben nodded and shifted aside to let them pass. Mara and Luke dashed down the tilted corridor as fast as age, wounds, and a slanting deck would permit.

Waiting was never something Ben enjoyed. He hated it more than ever now because he had no other choice.

He passed the time listening to K'Kruhk recount his tale. He knew he should have been fascinated by meeting a Jedi of the Old Republic who'd been living in exile for sixty years, but it was hard to care much when he could feel Jacen all the time, panicked and alone. He had no idea how or why Jacen had come to this planet and he might not ever get a chance to find out all. Jacen

might even *die* because he wasn't there to help, because he'd taken a stupid spill from a speeder in Windlash Alley and broken his leg.

The old Whiphid seemed to sense Ben's troubles. He stopped his story and asked, "Who is it that's in danger?"

"My cousin," Ben said, then added, "More than my cousin. He's my teacher."

"A Jedi Master should be able to survive against great adversity."

"He's... not a Jedi Master, just a Knight. Technically. But he's a great teacher. He's a hero who ended the last big war."

"And he is family."

"Yeah." He didn't know what K'Kruhk was getting at.

The Whiphid snorted through big nostrils. "In the Old Republic, we had no Jedi marriages. No Jedi children, no Jedi parents. No Jedi brothers or cousins. We were always told that attachment is a weakness, a distraction from understanding the true nature of the Force."

Ben knew that. He'd just forgotten. He said, "Well, when my dad made the new Jedi Order, I guess he wanted to do things different."

"So it seems," K'Kruhk said neutrally.

That, and he hadn't even known about Jedi celibacy. That had been one of many things about the Old Republic that the Emperor had erased from history and had to be slowly puzzled out decades later.

Ben couldn't tell if he approved or disapproved, but for some reason he felt uncomfortable talking about the topic. He'd spent a long time not wanting to be associated with his great Jedi parents; in some ways he still didn't. Sometimes he almost envied Jedi from K'Kruhk's era who never knew their parents at all and never had to suffer from living in their shadow.

But only sometimes. In crisis, he had to admit that.

"It's better this way," he said to himself, aloud.

K'Kruhk stared at him, as though expecting more.

"Attachment is... difficult. Family can mean problems. But I wouldn't want to live without my parents, or my cousins."

K'Kruhk regarded him carefully. Those little yellow eyes, that massive inhuman face, were so hard to read.

Finally, he said, "Perhaps there is wisdom in what you say. You are different from the Jedi children I knew in my time."

Ben rankled at being called a child, but at twelve years old he was probably a toddler by Whiphid standards. He asked, "How is that?"

"Padawans in our Temple were raised by their Masters from an early age. The bonds were very close, like a parent and child. It became a source of great pain when the Republic began to crumble. I was still a padawan when my master, Lillit Twoseas, died on Yinchorr. It was... a very difficult loss for me."

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "We rebuilt the Temple on Coruscant, you know. I've heard it's just like the old one. You can tell me if it's true when you come back with us."

"I do not wish to come back."

"Oh." Ben didn't know what to say. He looked over his shoulder and saw the torches of the native Shikari still ringing the crash site. K'Kruhk had been living on this harsh planet, with these strange tribes, for decades. Ben didn't want to spend another hour on this world, but somehow K'Kruhk must have gotten used to it.

"Well, we're going to have to get off this planet. Will you at least help us do that?"

"That is something I can do," K'Kruhk agreed.

"Good." Ben allowed a smile. "Glad to know we can count on a fellow Jedi."

He felt something roll of K'Kruhk through the Force, the first strong feeling he'd gotten from the Whiphid since he came aboard *Jade Shadow*. It felt like a very deep regret.

Ben knew better than to press a being when he wasn't ready to talk. If K'Kruhk was giving him a mystery to ponder, well, at least that was better than worrying about Jacen and his parents the whole time. He could still feel them in the back of his awareness: His mother's cold determination, his father's worry, and his cousin's abject panic. He was used to Jacen being calm, wise, and in control. He couldn't remember him ever seeming so frightened and wondered what the problem could be.

Suddenly Jacen's presence changed.

"Oh," he sucked in breath.

"What is it?" asked K'Kruhk.

"They found him."

CHAPTER TWELVE

In the dancing firelight they looked like monsters crafted by some Sith alchemy. They ran on six legs, each tipped with four-clawed feet. Their heads were round and their faces almost humanoid, though their eyes seemed too large for their skulls and their mouths seemed to burst with long pointed teeth. Long spikes ran from the arch of their backs and thin tails snapped back and forth like whips.

When Mara and Luke found them, there was almost a dozen of them circling a figure prone in the darkness. That figure, laid flat on the rocky ground, held a green lightsaber horizontally to ward off the attackers. The bodies of two beasts lay not far from him. As Luke and Mara crested the hill another beast was preparing leap on Jacen from behind.

Mara threw herself down the slope. She used the Force to cushion her fall, just a little, but pain still shot through her feet and legs on impact. She had just enough awareness to spin around and run her blade through the gut of a beast in mid-leap.

As she used the Force to toss an animal's corpse aside she looked down at Jacen. His face was blackened by ash and probably burn damage. His clothes were tattered. His eyes were wide and his jaw was slack in speechless shock.

Luke was coming down the slope behind her on foot. The remaining beasts didn't seem cowed, and two broke off from the circle to attack Luke. He ignited his blue lightsaber and waved it in front of him in warning, but the animals didn't take his hint and kept coming. He cleaved one in half mid-leap and sliced the foreleg out from the other.

Another animal leaped at Mara. She swiped her blade upward and caught it in the side, shearing off one leg. The animal tumbled to the rocks and scrambled away on three legs, howling.

Then something caught her in the leg. She fell face-first and landed on her hands. Rough rock scraped her palms and she looked back to see another beast with its paw around her leg. Claws pierced the black fabric of her jumpsuit and drew blood from her calf.

Jacen's blade flashed down. The animal's head tumbled off and its body crumpled.

"Thank you," Mara breathed as she pushed her upright. By now Luke had joined them, and even these monsters were getting afraid of three lightsabers. They were still circling them, but none seemed ready to attack.

"We have to get out of here," Jacen breathed. "*Now.*"

"They can't take all three of us," Luke said as the Jedi pressed shoulder-to-shoulder, all three sabers pointed outward.

That was when Mara finally saw the fourth body. In the flicking firelight she could make out a woman with long hair, probably red, lying prone on the rocks right where Jacen had been laying. No, Jacen had been laying on top of her, shielding her body with his own. When she saw that one of the woman's arms was missing she understood.

"Is that Tenel Ka's shuttle?" she asked.

"It was."

"Is she okay?"

"I don't *know*!" Jacen's voice scraped in his throat.

Suddenly the animals scattered. High howls rose into the twilight but slowly receded as the beasts disappeared among the rocks and crags.

Jacen kept his lightsaber up. "What is it? What drove them off?"

"I don't feel anything in the Force," Luke frowned.

Jacen switched his saber to one hand and bent over Tenel Ka. He placed a finger to her neck, feeling for a pulse, and said, "She's still alive, but we have to get her to safety! She got stabbed by shrapnel. I cauterized the wound but there might be internal bleeding."

Mara switched off her saber and bent over Tenel Ka. She helped Jacen roll the woman on her back. Her face was darkened by dirt and burning, just like Jacen's, and her face, normally controlled and regal, was slack with unconsciousness.

"Is Ben with *Shadow*? Can he move it?"

"*Shadow*'s not going anywhere," Mara shook her head. "We'll have to carry her."

"Look!" Luke shouted behind them. Three heads tilted upward to see twin red lights in the sky above them. As the ship approached its silhouette became recognizable: A Trade Federation droid starfighter.

"That's what shot us down," Jacen breathed.

"Us too," said Luke.

"It's coming slowly," Mara said. "Might be a scout."

"Jacen, do you know who-" Luke stopped and shook his head. "We'll talk later."

"It's going to see us," Jacen said. He couldn't take his eyes away.

"Come on." Luke tugged both their shoulders. "We have to hide. Now."

"There's no time," Jacen said, and he was right. The fighter was almost on top of them now and there was no way to move Tenel Ka safely before it spotted them. It

might try to gun them down or it might flee back to the control ship. They were trapped with no escape and no good outcome.

"Not again," Jacen said and reached out as if to touch the approaching fighter. "*Not again.*"

Mara could feel him surge in the Force. He was overflowing with desperation, fear, and anger most of all.

"Jacen!" Luke snapped. "Stop!"

Jacen's hand balled into a fist. The fighter seemed to freeze in mid-air over the crash zone. Its silhouette seemed to tremble against the violet sky. Red sparks fell like spurts of rain. Then the fighter was wrenched from the sky and tumbled, wing-over-wing, over the rim of the closest hills. Then there was a flash of light, the rumble of an explosion, and a second pillar of fire shot into the night sky to join the pyre of Tenel Ka's ship.

Jacen faded quickly. The desperation, fear, and anger were gone. He turned and faced Luke and Mara but said nothing, like he was daring them to criticize. Mara could feel her husband's anger, carefully restrained, but at the moment she only felt grateful to Jacen.

Finally, Luke said, "We'll talk about this later. Let's get Tenel Ka to safety."

"Gladly," Jacen said.

He bent low and scooped up the unconscious woman in both arms. He drew on the Force for extra strength, and cradling her long body against his chest he looked at his aunt and uncle and said, "Okay, let's go."

Dorcan, Vidious, and Paks Veem stared at the blue static on the holo-projector for a long moment. Finally, the Devaronian reached out and turn it off. The broad command deck, empty save for three sentients and two guard droids, was eerily quiet.

"Okay," Dorcan leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest, "*That* was a neat trick."

"Did you recognize any of them?" Veem asked. There had only been a few worthwhile seconds of footage from the droid's visual recorders before its destruction. Vidious had frozen the recording on an image of three humans or humanoids standing, plus one on the ground.

"The Hapan Queen had only one arm," Dorcan stroked his trim beard. "That wasn't the woman on her feet, so it was probably the one on the ground."

"What about the one you... felt?" Veem eyed Vidious.

The tattooed Devaronian seemed deep in thought. "I cannot tell from a mere holo. However, I believe the standing woman and older man were the Skywalkers. Do you agree?"

Veem blinked all three eyes. The resolution on the droid's holo-recording had hardly been ideal, and the poor lighting had made it worse.

"I never met Mara Jade," he said, "But I think the light-haired man might have been Luke Skywalker."

"Then who's the dark-haired one?" Dorcan asked. "It looked like he was the one who did... whatever. Threw the starfighter or something."

"That was impressive," Veem said. "I mean, back at the Academy, even the big-time Jedi had trouble with, well, heavy lifting."

"Out of your range, huh?" Dorcan said. He seemed to find all this entertaining, even amusing.

"I can barely pick up a data-rod with my mind. To pull a starfighter out of the sky is... something else."

Vidious said, "That manner of raw strength often requires one to touch what Jedi call the Dark Side."

Veem's mouth went a little dry. "Uh, yeah. The Dark Side."

"Dark Side, Bright Side, Purple Side, whatever," Dorcan said. "These guys aren't gonna be too happy

when they find us. I'm surprised they haven't come already."

"They might have wounded, "Veem suggested. "Or they might be trying to repair their ships. Or they might not know where we are." He glanced at Vidious. "Um... do they? Know where we are?"

"Not to my knowledge." The Devaronian pushed himself out of his seat and stalked toward the exit. "I must consult with Dician. Remain on the bridge in case there are new developments."

"Uh, okay. Great. Will do, captain," Veem sighed.

Sarcasm might not have been the best move right now but Vidious strode out the door without seeming to notice. When he was gone the Gran sighed again and slumped in his chair.

As if to fill the silence, Dorcan said, "I once knew a guy with tattoos like that. Well, not *quite* they like. More blue-and-red. Guy only had them on his face and hands, the rest of him was pink. This guy's probably got 'em all over, not that I've checked."

Veem turned a three-eyed glare on him. "Do you think this is funny? Aren't you worried at all about what kind of people we're working for?"

Dorcan raised an eyebrow. "*You're* the guy they hired first. I figured you were the kind to do your homework on clients before you sign on."

"I do, when I can." Veem ground his flat teeth.

Normally he checked on his clients' background, including a search for criminal history and aliases. If he met them in person, he always read their intentions through the Force. Dician had communicated only via holo, and she'd been untraceable in any data registry he knew of (and he pretty much knew them all). The sweet pile of credits she'd offered had silenced any alarms in his head.

"I gotta say I'm not too big on facing down some pissed-off Jedi," Dorcan allowed. "That's why I've got *Lady* on standby."

"Your ship? What do you mean she's on standby?"

Dorcan pulled back the sleeve of his jacket to flash a small control panel on the underside of his right wrist. "Got a slave circuit. If I want I can fire her engines now and have her ready for take-off by the time I get to the deck."

"That's good. I might need to grab a ride if this goes south. I don't want to rely on our employers."

"Oh yeah. You lost *Full Hand* on Coruscant, right?"

"She's currently impounded by Alliance Intel. If they haven't taken her apart or sold her for scrap already. I had to buy a junker to get off-planet."

"Tough luck. *Hand* was a good ship."

"I would still have her too if it weren't for those kriffing Jedi."

"The way I heard it from Alsok, you'd both be in jail if it weren't for the Jedi. You felt 'em in the Force, got tipped off and ran. If they were normals losers like me, you might not have sensed them at all and got nabbed."

He hadn't thought of it like that. He didn't want to. He'd spent most of the past several days blaming Force-users for his cascade of problems and he wasn't going to let Dorcan's dose of reason stop him now.

He said, "I'm sick of Force-users, you understand? I'm sick of meddling. I just want to go my own way."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but haven't you made a pretty credit using those magic powers of yours to meddle with other beings?"

"I'm just one man. I'm not part of some Jedi Order trying to right every wrong in the galaxy. I'm not..."

He trailed off. A thought came to the front of his mind. He really, really didn't like it and tried to shove it to the back where it belonged, but it wouldn't budge.

“Hey, what's up?” Dorcan leaned forward, curious.

“Dorcan... You ever heard of the Sith?”

The human frowned. “That some kind of animal?”

“No, no. They're like Jedi, only they use the Dark Side of the Force.”

“That the raw power stuff Mister Tattoo was talking about?”

“The Dark Side is... it's all about anger and domination and control. It's about *power* more than anything. The Sith crave it. They live for it.”

“And the Jedi don't? I hear they've got a pretty swank new temple on Coruscant.”

“That's different. The Jed like power, sure. They like going around telling everybody else what to do. The Sith... they're different. You *make* you do what they want. Or you die.”

Dorcan looked serious for once. “You speaking from experience?”

“The Sith have been around for thousands of years. Palpatine was a Sith. Vader was. And when I was at the Academy there was this... this *place*. I never went there but they called it the Shadow Academy. Some Imp protégé of Palpatine went and kidnapped kids with the Force and tried to bring them up as a new generation of Sith.”

“And what happened to them?”

“What do you think? They Jedi killed them.”

He still remembered the time the Shadow Academy had attacked Yavin 4. He'd spent pretty much the entire fight crouched under his bunk in his dorm on the Blueleaf Temple, which had at least been better than being inside the Great Temple when a bomb went off inside it. That had been the last nudge he needed to walk away from the Jedi Order forever and take up a life of crimes and cons. His old Master Dorsk 82 was disappointed in him, but now Dorsk 82 was dead and

Paks Veem was alive, which answered the question as to who was wiser in the long run.

Dorcan looked uncharacteristically serious. "Do you think our bosses are more Sith?"

"I don't know. I'm afraid to find out."

"So you think they're cloning Jedi to do... what? Make evil copies? Infiltrators? Don't Jedi have all kinda of magic powers? You'd think they could sense a duplicate, even if the dupe's trained really hard to mimic the real thing. Or is there more of this Force magic stuff involved?"

"I don't know." Veem lowered his voice. "Forget I said anything. Forget *all* of it. These people might be able to read thoughts off the top of your head."

"Well... *That* does sound spooky." Dorcan's expression had finally gone grim. Five minutes ago Veem had wanted to smack some seriousness into him. Now he wanted him to joke and grin like he'd used to.

"Still," Dorcan said, "These Jedi, they're supposed to be big on justice and peace, right? They wouldn't try to, you know, kill us unless we try and kill them first. Right?"

"I don't think so. But they might not like the company we keep."

Dorcan settled back in his seat. He crossed his arms over his chest again. His mouth was a flat, firm line.

Veem stared at the empty spot where the holo-recording had just played. He muttered, "They're coming. And soon."

It was a reunion he'd never thought he'd have. He would have done anything to escape it forever.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It was very hard to be one room away from the woman you loved and not be able to help her. It was even worse having to hide the extent of his feelings. He knew how to shut off his Force presence from others. Vergere had taught him that. He tried to summon that skill, because otherwise he didn't think he could keep his emotions from overflowing onto those around him.

Jade Shadow was in poor shape, but at least she was intact. The shuttle sat slanted on a mountain-side, and to get anywhere you had to walk with one hand bracing you against the walls so you didn't slip off the sloping deck. That meant you couldn't pace anxiously, which was what Jacen really wanted to do right now. Communications were smashed and the main reactors were dead. Hull integrity was probably compromised and the shields weren't going to run.

But at least the auxiliary power was on, which meant that the emergency medical droid could charge up and examine Tenel Ka. Mara had laid Tenel Ka in *Shadow's* small sick bay and was with there now, which left Jacen to wait in the foyer outside with Luke, Ben, and the massive old Whiphid Jedi who had, apparently, been hiding on this miserable planet for almost sixty years.

Normally Jacen would have been fascinated to meet a Master of the Old Republic. The only one he had known

before had been of great importance to him, and it was possible K'Kruhk had known Vergere. At the moment, however, all he cared about was Tenel Ka.

But because he couldn't pace on the slanging floor, he stood outside the door with his arms crossed and his body leaning back some ten degrees until his shoulder-blades pressed the wall. Ben and Luke were sitting on a bench along the wall, while K'Kruhk stood in the doorway leading to the main corridor. His bulk filled the whole threshold.

He had already explained to all of them why he and Tenel Ka had come to this planet. Thankfully, he hadn't had to lie. That the kidnapping of Prince Isolder had dovetailed into the Skywalker's mission was a bit of scarcely-believable coincidence, but right now he was willing to chalk it up to the will of the Force. He was just glad someone had been here to help Tenel Ka.

The great coincidence also left new things to ponder. For one, it was possible that Paks Veem had been the one to sense his presence at Krizlar Station. Frankly, he hoped so. An Academy drop-out he could handle. If more powerful Force-users were waiting for them at the crashed Trade Federation control ship (and Luke assured him somebody was) they might be in trouble.

It seemed to take an eternity, but eventually Mara came out. The black spherical medial droid hovered over her shoulder.

"How is she?" Jacen tried to keep his voice steady.

"She'll be all right," Mara nodded.

"What does that mean? Does she have organ damage? Muscle tissue?"

"No organ damage. Some cut muscle tissue, but she seems to have put herself in a healing trance." Mara gestured to the black sphere. "Doctor Droid here injected some bacta salve to the wound. So all we can do now is wait."

"Thank the Force."

From the opposite doorway, K'Kruhk said, "It is amazing that all of you have survived."

"Yeah, no kidding," Ben said. "I'm also pretty amazed that nobody's come after us yet. I mean, they sent a droid fighter to Tenel Ka's ship, right?"

Jacen met Luke's eyes and didn't reject the silent accusation there. Yes, he had reached inside himself and drawn on his anger and hate and frustration to destroy the droid starfighter. He would do it again, absolutely, in order to protect Tenel Ka. If anything Luke should have been thanking him for saving them all, but instead he was looking at Jacen as though he were a stranger.

When the silence dragged on a little too long, Mara said, "I don't know why they haven't come after us. They also stopped shooting at us when we were starting to crash."

"So they're trying to kill us, but they're not trying very hard." Jacen said. "That makes a lot of sense."

"There has to be something we're missing," Luke said.

"If you have any ideas, I'm all ears."

"Well we're not going to find any answers sitting on our butts," Mara said. She was looking right at K'Kruhk.

The Whiphid nodded. "Very well. I'm ready to go when you are."

"Go?" Jacen asked. "Go where?"

"*Pride of Chandrila*, the Republic assault carrier crashed two kilometers north of here."

"Are you looking for replacements? A comm system? Another ship?"

"Anything and everything," Mara looked at her son. "Sorry Ben, but I don't think you're up for this trip either."

"I know. Don't worry, I'll stay here and watch Tenel Ka."

"I will too," Jacen said, maybe a little too quickly, but Mara just nodded.

"Fill her in on the situation if she wakes up. Luke, Master K'Kruhk, let's get our gear and go." She glanced at her medical droid and said, "Stay with Tenel Ka."

The droid made two chirping noises, then slunk back into the medical bay. Meanwhile, K'Kruhk turned and wordlessly made his way down the corridor. Jacen shifted awkwardly so Mara and Luke could stagger across the slanted deck to follow.

Before leaving, Luke turned around. "Ben, Jacen, if anything happens, anything at *all*, you can reach out to me in the Force and let me know. Don't try to take on everything by yourselves."

"Sure Dad."

"Of course, Master Luke."

"Good." Luke nodded, and followed Mara out of the room.

As their awkward footsteps fell down the hall, Ben said, "This is one big mess-up, huh?"

"I think you're holding yourself together pretty well," Jacen said, and meant it. He was a twelve-year-old boy who'd almost died and still might, and worse still, he was hobbled and incapable of truly *doing* anything to help himself or his loved ones. Jacen would have been furious in that situation, but Ben seemed to be taking it all in reasonable stride.

Ben glanced at the doorway to the medical bay. "I'm glad she's gonna be okay."

"Me too." It was all Jacen could say.

"You are Tenel Ka, are you... Well..." Ben looked hesitant. Jacen's breath caught. But he finished, "You've been friends for a long time, right?"

"Since we were a little older than you are." He wasn't sure what Ben was getting at.

A sad smile came to his face. "That's nice. I kind of wish I had friends my own age. People I could get older and stay friends with. But I guess that's what I get for hanging around you instead of all the kids the temple, huh?"

"You don't *need* friends your own age, Ben. You don't have to do what other people do. You're special and you should act special."

"You're laying the flattery on thick, huh?"

"I'm saying it because it's true, Ben."

"You just want me to keep hanging around you when this is all over." Ben grinned sheepishly.

"That too," Jacen admitted.

Ben's eyes drifted back to the medical bay. His smile wilted. "I really hope we get out of this. All of us."

Jacen nodded grimly. Right now, it seemed like *hope* was about all they had going for them.

They progressed through Kal'shikar's mountain passes in a winding single-file snake. Three of the Shikari tribals took the lead, their torches held high as they found the easiest ways to pass through the crags and quarries that separated them from their destination. Three more Shikari were in the rear, always looking over their humped shoulders for signs of pursuit. Mara, Luke, and K'Kruhk were in the middle of the line, though more Shikari were interspersed between them.

There was something unsettling about the planet's native sentients. Their heavy shoulders, long forearms, round faces, and spiked backs recalled the beasts that had attacked Jacen and Tenel Ka at the crash site, and Mara assumed some path of divergent evolution had separated their species millions of years back. She could sense her guides' feelings through the Force, and there was no cause for alarm, but she felt anxious anyway.

Through the Force, she could sense their single-minded devotion to protecting their wards. All it had taken were a few words in their guttural tongue from K'Kruhk, and they'd fallen in line instantly. Mara wondered what their actions would have been like without K'Kruhk's guidance. She suspected it would have made for a far less friendly greeting.

At one point, when the Jedi stopped for a drink, she asked K'Kruhk, "How long did it take you to learn their language?"

The Whiphid poured a little water from his canteen down his wide mouth, then said, "Even now I cannot speak it as they do. I can make simple vocalizations. Otherwise, I direct them with the Force."

"Do you control their thoughts?" Luke asked.

Mara knew her husband generally frowned on mind control. It might not have been as clear a Dark Side trait as Force lightning or red-gold eyes, but it bespoke a desire to manipulate that fed the power-hungry side of beings' natures.

But the Whiphid shook his shaggy head. "I do not command them or steal their wills, Master Skywalker. I simply... clarify what I cannot say in words."

"They seem very loyal to you," Mara pointed out.

"I have been with them a long time. The Shikari have shorter lifespans than you humans, and certainly shorter than Whiphids. I have guided these beings' fathers, and the fathers before them."

Mara wondered what these tribal beings must make of the big alien who had guarded them for generations. She wondered how religion worked for them, and whether K'Kruhk had evolved into some kind of god without his even willing it.

After capping their canteens, the Jedi continued their march. She glanced at her wrist chronometer as they walked through the jagged gloom, and by her count it

took them three full hours before they arrived at *Pride of Chandrila's* wreckage.

An *Acclamator*-class assault carrier was nowhere near the size of the Star Destroyers it had inspired, but it was massive nonetheless. The cruiser seemed to be wedged between a pair of mountains, with the forward tip of its gray wedge jutting out over a steep canyon. Despite its precarious appearance, Mara knew there was nothing short of a turbolaser bombardment or landslide that would dislodge the massive ship.

Getting inside was not easy, but they found a way through a port-side airlock. The airlock was elevated some twenty feet above the closest ridge, and K'Kruhk had used it on his previous visits to the crashed ship. K'Kruhk ordered the Shikari to stay outside while he joined Luke and Mara in levitating themselves across the gap.

The inside of the ship was dark, and Luke and Mara had to turn on the forward-focused glow-lamps they'd brought from *Shadow*. K'Kruhk may not have been inside the ship for years, but he still directed smoothly through dark, narrow corridors toward the auxiliary communications deck. On another planet, this ship would have been crawling with animals or breaking down with rust and mold, but Kal'shikar was such a dry, hostile environment that the real damage to the superstructure had come from the expansion and contraction of durasteel during periods of extreme heat and extreme cold.

Parts of the ship had been crushed during the crash, which forced them to take unusual paths through the carrier. When K'Kruhk guided them into the secondary hangar bay, he guided them to a control station and, to Mara's surprise and relief, was able to activate the secondary power generators. The immense darkness around them lifted to reveal a massive cavern strewn

with old Clone Wars-era fighters and shuttlecraft. The crash had tossed most of these ships free from their berths, and the deck was a littered with the debris of dozens of vessels smashed against each other. She saw an old diamond-shaped Delta fighter with its nose jammed through the cockpit of a V-wing. One ARC-170 fighter had its port S-foils shorn off while another had its nose plunged halfway through the portside wall.

"What a mess," she muttered.

"It's almost like a museum," Luke said as he surveyed the scene.

"Well, whoever's in charge of historic preservation should be fired." Mara looked at K'Kruhk. "Now that power's on, can we send a distress call?"

"I believe so," the Whiphid said after a moment's hesitation.

Well, Mara thought, it was the best she was going to get. "Can you take us there?"

"Of course," he nodded. "Come. Follow. I would not risk the turbolifts, as the power might die suddenly. However, there are repair conduits we can climb to the auxiliary command deck."

Mara wasn't sure if a massive Whiphid could squeeze through narrow repair conduits, but if he'd done it before, maybe he could do it again. She said, "Lead the way."

"Will you be coming back this way?" Luke asked. He was still surveying the wreckage.

"This is the only path," K'Kruhk said.

Luke looked at his wife. "Mara, go with K'Kruhk. I'm going to stay here."

"To look at a trashed museum, Skywalker? No offense, but I think we have more important things to do."

"Don't worry, I'm sure you can fix a comm system," Luke said. "Most of these ships I've only seen in holos. Back on Tatooine I used to study the ships they'd flown

in the Clone Wars. I used to fantasize my T-16 was an ARC fighter.”

“Really, Skywalker? You’re on a nostalgic kick? *Now?*” She’d dragged her husband and son on a dangerous mission for her own nostalgia kick, but at least she had the good sense to get serious when lives were in danger.

“Please, Mara,” he said, “It won’t do any harm to look. Some of these ships might even be operable.”

Mara looked at K’Kruhk. “Is this true?”

He shrugged massive shoulders. “The dry air preserves things well on this world. However, I was never a mechanic.”

“Well, I was,” Luke said, and to Mara’s shock the gray-haired Grand Master of the Jedi Order had a positively boyish gleam in his eye.

“Okay, Skywalker, we’ll leave you to play with toys,” Mara rolled her eyes. “Master K’Kruhk, lead on.”

“Gladly.”

They left Luke to forage through the wreckage of a fully-loaded assault carrier and headed down another set of hallways. The auxiliary lighting was dim, but it gave Mara a far better sense of her surroundings than the shifting beams of a glow-lamp.

As they walked, she commented, “I’m surprised we aren’t seeing any bodies.”

“There were, once,” K’Kruhk said grimly. “Many beings were killed in the crash. Others attempted to leave the ship and were killed by wild animals, or the Shikari themselves.”

Mara suppressed a shudder. “And what happened to *their* bodies?”

K’Kruhk turned around and blinked in her bright lamp-light. “I gave them proper burials. All of them.”

Mara tried to wrap her mind around the grim enormity of the task. All she could say was, “That was very good of you.”

"It was the least I could do. And I had a long time to do it." K'Kruhk turned, ending the conversation. "Come. We are nearing our destination."

"Glad to hear it," she muttered, and followed him.

They soon reached another chamber, not nearly as large as the secondary hangar but still wider than a corridor or even a basic ready-room. Three full rows of broad metal cylinders stood floor-to-ceiling, probably some four dozen in all.

Mara felt a chill go down her spine. She'd seen these before, a long time ago, in the Emperor's storehouse on Wayland. On Wayland there had been hundreds of Spaarti Cylinders, not mere dozens, and Grand Admiral Thrawn had used them to grow a brand-new Imperial Army in record time.

"Sithspawn," she muttered.

"Indeed," K'Kruhk grunted "I was always disturbed by the Republic's use of clone soldiers. I thought they were little more than slaves, with the Jedi as reluctant but voluntary masters. During the last months of the war, troops grown in Spaarti tubes starting reaching the front lines. Those beings were grown and flash-trained in the space of a year, not a decade. I found them even more disturbing than the Kaminoan clones."

"Even the Emperor thought Spaarti tubes could be misused easily," Mara said. "That's why he was very thorough in destroying all the ones he didn't control himself, especially once they started recruited storm-troopers from normal citizens. He didn't want anybody else growing an army really fast to replace him."

"This ship must have been transporting a shipment of cylinders when it went down," K'Kruhk said. "They were not, however, in use at the time, and as you can see, most were damaged in the crash."

Mara walked slowly down one row of cylinders. She was glad to see that a number of them had been cracked

or outright shattered during the crash, but she still felt foreboding. An icy feeling clung to her gut, and when she saw the missing spaces at the end of the row her whole body turned cold.

K'Kruhk saw them too. There were a dozen ports in the floor in which to plug a working Spaarti cylinder.

"These were *not* missing when I came here last," the Whipid said.

"Now we know why they came here," Mara said grimly. "We were chasing a geneticist who'd studied cloning. We couldn't figure out why anybody would settle on a planet like this, but it all makes sense now."

K'Kruhk nodded. "If these Spaarti tubes were moved, there is only one place where they could have been re-installed.

"We have to take out that Trade Federation ship," Mara said grimly.

"It seems so."

"Come on." With great effort, she pulled her attention from the Spaarti tubes. "Take me to the communications deck. We need to get a message out, and fast."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Tenel Ka had never been good at healing. She'd never even *wanted* to be. At the Academy she'd barely been able to sit still for half a day before she followed her irresistible urges and went traipsing around the untamed, dangerous jungles of Yavin 4. Back then she'd fancied herself a skilled warrior-woman who would one day go back to her mother's homeworld of Dathomir (because she certainly didn't want to spend her life among her father's scheming aristocratic relatives on Hapes!).

When she'd lost her arm a very small part of her had actually relished the wound, because scars were marks of an experienced warrior, and because losing one arm presented her with new challenges to be overcome. And, back then, when she was young, she'd been confident that she could overcome *any* challenge and determine her *own* fate. That, she'd thought, was what being a Jedi was about.

It was funny how life turned out.

Funny, but usually in a very bitter way. That bitterness and, perhaps, a sneaking selfishness had made her drag Jacen into her bed four years ago for a single night of solace. If she'd known what future that one night would make, the lie she'd have the live, the pain of separation she'd force herself, Jacen and Allana to endure, would she do it again? A part of her couldn't bear a life without

Allana. Another part of her wondered how different things could have been.

She was sorry. She was sorry for the painful road she'd led Jacen down, and worse, she was sorry she'd wasted so many years without making her feelings clear. She'd been so intent on being the warrior that she'd forgotten how to be a woman, and denied all desires that hadn't had to do with training her body to fight.

"I'm sorry, Jacen," she muttered aloud. "I'm sorry..."

"Sorry for what?" she heard a voice, distant, as though muffled through water.

She didn't answer. It took great effort to pry her eyes open. Bright light filled her vision and a dim shadow shifted overhead. She felt weak, but also well-rested, as though she'd just had a long and sound sleep.

The form hovered over her became clearer. A pale face, red hair. Short red hair. Facial features that seemed familiar, yet not.

"Ben," she muttered. "You've gotten... different."

The boy grinned. "Glad you remember me, Your Majesty."

Then she remembered the crash, the fire, the pain. "Where are we?"

There was another sound. Feet clamping hard on metal. A second form hovered over her, and she felt Jacen's familiar presence caress hers in the Force.

"Jacen... friend Jacen..." She weakly raised a hand.

Jacen held it. "It's okay, Ben. I'll take it from here."

"You sure? I mean, she could-"

"Why don't you go work on the generator, Ben? We need to see if we can get the main engines back."

"Okay, sure." The boy sounded a little dejected. "I'm glad you're okay, Your Majesty."

"Thank you, Ben."

She heard steps recede. They were much louder than Jacen's, almost as though the boy were hobbling along

in a cast. When the clanking was far away, Jacen bent low and kissed her, once on the forehead, once on the mouth.

"I'm sorry, Jacen," she said weakly.

"Don't be sorry for anything. Ever." Jacen said. He kept his head bowed low so she could look into his dark eyes and feel his breath against her face.

"Jacen... where are we?"

He told her everything as briefly as he could. It seemed an incredibly coincidence that both *Teneniel* and *Jade Shadow* had crashed on the same planet, chasing the same quarry. It was even stranger still that their quarry had not turned tables and finished off the wounded hunters, and she said so.

"I'm hoping that means they know they can't fight off a bunch of Jedi," Jacen replied.

"They had no problem shooting us down."

"True," he admitted, "But I'm not sure what other explanations there are."

"This old Jedi, what is he like?"

"I don't know. He's a Whiphid. You know, tusks, lots of hair. He's hard to judge. He seems... withdrawn. Sad."

"I'm sure he's seen horrors."

"We all have." He touched the side of her face.

"Yes. Of course." She paused. "I don't want to be helpless. I don't want to stay here while the rest of you go fight."

He smiled a little. "Slow down, Your Highness. You're not as young as you used to be."

"Nor are you, *friend* Jacen. However, it would not be right of me to remain in sick bay while my friends risk their lives. I couldn't stand it.

"Well then, you'd better go back into a healing trance, because otherwise I doubt you'll be mended enough to fight."

"Then I will do so... If you don't mind my taking leave."

"Tenel Ka, I won't leave your side."

"Good. Then perhaps, friend Jacen, you have learned something useful when you were away from me those five years. Something that can help me heal."

He considered. "I can't think of anything specifically, but I think I can lend some of my Force powers to your own. It might accelerate the healing process."

"I am pleased to hear it," she gave his hand a little squeeze, then closed her eyes. She muttered, "Work your magic, my friend."

In the end, turning on *Pride of Chandrila's* emergency distress beacon had been surprisingly easy. Mara had walked onto the secondary control deck expecting to have to weld together shattered machinery with her bare hands and wrack her memory for technical lessons she'd never learned, but in the end, all she'd had to do was record her message and flip a switch.

The hardest part had been deciding what message she wanted to send. Using the auxiliary comm system, there was no way to broadcast a tight-beam encrypted message to Coruscant, which was unfortunate, because Kalenda's people needed to be warned that someone was working with Spaarti cylinders again.

In any case, Kalenda was days away and they needed help sooner. Karrde and Mazzic were closer, but she had no way to broadcast a focused message to Ukio or Ord Mantell either.

In the end, she settled for a message most likely to draw any sentient passing close to the Kal'shikar system. She simply said their ships had crashed, they had wounded, and they needed evac as soon as possible. She also read off the longitude and latitude of *Jade Shadow's*

crash site and promised a fairly substantial reward to whomever rescued them.

She felt fairly certain Kalenda would cover the cost.

After that, she followed K'Kruhk through the maintenance tubes toward the hangar. She was once again surprised that the massive Whiphid could shimmy down the narrow chute, one ladder-rung at a time, but in the end they were back where they started: the chilling room packed with broken Spaarti cylinders.

Mara wanted to spend as little time there as possible, and she eagerly followed K'Kruhk back to the hangar deck. She was, she had to admit, interested to see what her husband had been up to. Even if the Grand Master retained some boyish qualities, she knew he wouldn't waste time here unless he thought he could actually accomplish something that would help with their mission. And though she forgot it sometimes, Luke had started out as a young man with an impeccable talent with flying machines. If anyone was going to magically fix up an old spacecraft and fly them to safety against impossible odds, it would be her husband.

She was, therefore, unsurprised when she found Luke crouched on the back of an old gunship. The LAAT/i had been one of the most iconic vessels of the Clone Wars, and had been used to transport clone troopers for quick entry in almost every conceivably environment. The gunship had a long, high body with wings jutting downward from the back, two bubble-shaped cockpit viewports in the front, and wide side-doors that could swing wholly back to allow for rapid troop deployment. Luke was currently perched on the humped rear section of a LAAT/i with a port wing half sheared off and a portside swing-door dented so it couldn't move properly.

Nonetheless, Luke was hard at work. He'd pulled off the panels on the gunship's aft section and was working on some part of its innards. Mara didn't remember much

about how these ships were structured, but she guessed he was either working on guns or engines, most likely the latter.

She planted her hands on her hips and called up, "Enjoying your new toy, Skywalker?"

He pulled his attention away from whatever he was working on and looked down at them. "I am, actually. Thanks for asking."

"Are you attempting to fix that craft's engines?" K'Kruhk called up. Unlike Mara and Luke, he didn't have sixty years' knowledge of more recent spacecraft. The LAAT/i was probably the most up-to-date technology he was familiar with, and if he'd been a Jedi general in the Clone Wars, he probably had at least a passing familiarity.

Luke said, "Most of the circuitry inside the engines is still intact. The fuel lines took some damage, but I've patched them up. What we really need is actual, working fuel for the thrust engines."

"Whoa, hey," Mara said, "Can that even work? I mean, this ship's been sitting here for more than half a century. Its power generators—"

"Draw energy from working thrust engines," said K'Kruhk. "If the engines work, the rest should work as well. These gunships were designed to be durable, and you can trust me that they were."

"We can fly assuming all the wiring in the cockpits haven't been damaged," Luke admitted. "I gave them a look-over and I think they're okay."

"It's going to take more than one look-over for me to get on that gunship, Skywalker."

"I understand, but I think this could be a big help, especially if we're going to have to pay that control ship a visit."

"You didn't ask if we set up the distress beacon," Mara reminded him.

"Don't worry, I trust you." He flashed boyish smile on an old man's face, guileless and confident.

Damn him.

"The beacon's up, but that's not important right now. Luke, this ship has Spaarti tubes onboard."

That got his attention. "Were there clones in them?"

"No, and most of the tubes were broken. But that's not the problem. The problem is--"

"Twelve cylinders were stolen," K'Kruhk said. "It is most likely that they are on board the Trade Federation vessel right now."

She felt Luke's distress in the Force, but he kept a straight face as he said, "Well, now we know what Veem and Alsok were up to. All the more reason to be prepared when we go face them."

"You make a wise point, Master Skywalker," K'Kruhk said. "I will search for adequate fuel. There are several places where I think it may be safely stored."

As the Whiphid moved off to some new corner of the hangar, Mara looked up at her husband, unmoving. He was already back at examining the guts of the gunship.

The whole thing still seemed like potentially dangerous waste of time to Mara, but she knew when she'd been outvoted. She restrained a sigh, then went to find K'Kruhk. There was, she supposed, some slim chance that this scheme might actually work.

And if it did, well, so much the better for all of them.

Paks Veem was not, by habit or profession, a being who hung around in scientific laboratories. He certainly didn't know anything about creative genetics, especially when it involved Force-users. For all he knew, those midi-chlorian things threw all the traditional rules of biology out the window.

But right now, he felt he needed to know a little more about whatever job he'd gotten himself into, so he went

down to the laboratory to pay Alsok a visit. The Omwati was right where Veem had left him, and the Gran was relieved to see that Dician and Vidious were nowhere in sight. But because he didn't trust them not to reappear at an inopportune moment, he kept his voice down as he asked, "How's it coming along?"

The Omwati looked up at Veem with a restrained scowl. Veem knew Alsok still blamed him for getting spotted by Jedi, and subsequently having to make an emergency sprint off-planet, but he hoped the scientist could put his irritation aside. And frankly, if anyone should have been mad about that, it should have been Veem himself. After all, Alsok wasn't the one whose prize freighter was impounded and stripped by Alliance Intel.

For a tense moment their eyes held. Finally, Alsok leaned back on his chair and said, "It's coming."

"So that's what you're doing, huh? Cloning Jedi?" Veem looked down the row of Spaarti tubes.

"Cloning itself isn't a difficult science," Alsok said. "Unpopular, given its history, but not difficult, especially when you have Spaarti tubes lying around. These are old models, not the best- Thrawn's people made some impressive upgrades on the ones they found- but they're clearly doing their job. Dician, in fact, is a talented scientist herself, despite her appearance. She was the one who oversaw the creation of the clones you see growing now."

"Then what do they need you here for?"

Alsok scowled again. "They *didn't* need me here. I *ended* up here because you dragged Alliance Intel and the whole Jedi Order down on me. I was supposed to be a *consultant*."

"Fine, whatever," Veem waved a three-fingered hand. "What are you doing here *now*, though? Are you still working on Tenel Ka's clone?"

"Her clone, and her child's," Alsok nodded. "Actually, what Dician *really* needed my help with was splicing out the maternal and parental genes from the child's sample."

"You can do that? Use the mom as a reference, pick out which DNA came from which parents?"

"It's not an easy task, especially when dealing with Force-users, but yes, its doable." Alsok rubbed his eyes.

Veem shifted eyestalks in every direction to make sure they were alone. There was a security cam in one corner but it didn't take audio. "So did you... You know... find anything?"

"Well, I still don't know who the father is, but I do know it's a Jedi."

"Whew," Veem whistled. "No wonder the kid's identity is being hidden. Hapans *hate* Jedi. They can barely stand having one as a queen."

"Already thinking of blackmail opportunities?"

"Maybe. Dorcan's link in the Hapan court got nabbed, probably by the Queen's secret police, but I'm sure plenty of people would be willing to pay good cred for a DNA sample."

"I'm not sure if our... employers would approve of your using their property for private business."

"They'll only care if they find out. Besides, it's not like it's really *their* property now, is it?"

Alsok's gaunt, blue, aristocratic face twisted in distaste.

"Oh, don't give me that," Veem rolled all three eyes. "I've seen your apartment. *You're* the one who's made a killing on tons of less-than-legal jobs."

"I'm a scientist. I pursue knowledge anywhere, even places the Alliance government doesn't think is appropriate."

"Sure, all those fancy art objects you've got are the fruits of scientific passion. Listen, all I need is a copy of the data you have so far. Nobody will notice."

When Alsok still didn't budge, Veem nudged with the Force and said, "I'll give you a portion of the profits."

The cool blue mask slipped a little. "Forty percent."

"Fifteen."

"Thirty."

"Twenty, and I'm not going higher." He knew he wouldn't have to. Alsok was emanating avarice.

He made a show of considering. Then he moved fast. One data-card slipped into his computer, his fingers flew across the keyboard, and then he took it out and handed it to Veem. The Gran took it in a three-fingered hand and slipped it into his trouser pocket.

"You're a smart man," Veem said.

"We'll see. I'm not entirely sure our masters are going to let us live through this."

Veem had been thinking the same thing, but he hadn't dared put it into words. "You really think that's possible?"

"Well, we *are* splicing Jedi genes and making clones. I'll admit this is a new level of illegality for me."

"But these clones... They won't have actual memories of the real thing, will they? I mean, Spaarti cylinders are just supposed to be do basic flash-learning. People fresh out of those tubes are supposed to act like droids. They'd never pass for real Jedi."

"I don't know what these people are planning to do with Jedi clones and I don't want to know," Alsok shook his head. "I figure the less I know, the more likely I am to survive."

Paks Veem had made a living as an information dealer, so he didn't want to admit Alsok was right, though he almost certainly was. It made the datachip in his pocket seem heavier.

In a lame attempt to lighten the mood, Veem gestured to the Spaarti cylinders and asked, "Any chance Daddy's in one of those tubes?"

"I already checked, and no. You're the, whatever, ex-Jedi, so-."

"Drop-out."

"Drop-out, fine. You'd have a better chance at guessing the father of Tenel Ka's child than I would."

"I already told Vidious, I barely knew her at the Academy. She was always running around with the Solo kids, and that Wookiee, and..."

He trailed off. The Academy might have been full of righteous Jedi apprentices, but those apprentices had also been teenagers, which meant there'd been plenty of gossip. Some gossip had even filtered down from the royalty to lowly hacks like Veem. He remembered some gossip about the Solo girl, Jaina or Jaila or whatever, being in close with some street urchin who'd fought for the Shadow Academy, or something like that. And the Solo boy had, supposedly, been close to Tenel Ka Djo, even after he'd cut off her arm during lightsaber practice.

Normally, not the best way to win over a girl, but Jedi royalty didn't play by normal rules.

He was only vaguely aware of what had happened between the two since the Academy days. Tenel Ka succeeded her mother as Queen of Hapes some ten years back, and Jacen Solo had disappeared, reappeared, and apparently won the Vong War somehow. He'd heard nothing about the two of them doing anything together in that time, but he wasn't really in the proper circles to pick up that kind of gossip anymore. Frankly, he'd been *avoiding* news about Jedi ever since he'd fled the Academy half a lifetime ago.

Still, if the Queen Mother was going to secretly sire a daughter with another Jedi, the old teenage flame was a likely candidate.

"That was a long time ago," he muttered at last.

He glanced at Alsok. The man was staring at his computer screen again and seemed to have given up on

any conversation with Veem. The Gran decided to let things rest where they were, and he turned for the exit.

As soon as he spun around the door hissed open and Dorcan's bearded face popped in.

"Hey, get up here, both of you," he called. "To the bridge!"

"What's going on?" Alsok rose from his chair.

"Stuff's happening, come on."

Dorcan ducked back into the hallway. Veem and Alsok followed him all the way to the command deck, where Dician and Vidious stood at a communications console. When Veem got close enough he could hear a woman's voice playing a continuous message on a loop. She said she'd crashed and was calling for help. She was even offering a hefty monetary reward for a rescue.

"Is this from Skywalker's ship?" Veem asked.

Vidious shook his head. "It's from the assault carrier."

For a second Veem couldn't believe that old ship had enough juice to send a distress signal. Then he remembered the vessel he was standing on was just as old.

"It's a powerful signal, too," Alsok observed. "Someone is likely to hear this."

"Then we have to kill the signal." Dician looked at Vidious. "We should send out droids. Destroy the ship entirely."

The Devaronian looked reluctant. He probably still wanted gene samples of whatever Jedi Masters were sending out the signal.

"If somebody comes to investigate, the whole plan's borked," Veem said. "Unless we just want to keep shooting down intruder after intruder, which might get a *little* distracting after-"

"Silence," Vidious snapped, and Veem felt a tightness seize his throat. It let go after a few seconds but left him gasping for breath.

"He's right," Dician pressed. "We can always pick up the pieces later."

"Very well," Vidious growled. "We'll send out everything we have. But we'll stop the attack once the signal has been killed."

"Very well," Dician nodded. "Do you want to give the order or should I?"

"I will do it." Red-and-black hands balled into fists. He gave Dician a stern glare. "But if we kill Luke Skywalker without getting his genetic sample, we will *both* answer to the Master."

"If we actually kill Luke Skywalker, I don't think the Master will mind." She smiled bitterly.

It was enough to give Paks Veem chills.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Mara Jade called her husband 'farmboy' all the time, but sometimes it was easy to forget how true that appellation was. Luke Skywalker was many things- husband, father, son, founder of a new Jedi Order, and all-around galactic savior- but deep down a part of him would always be a boy on a moisture farm on Tatooine who tinkered with machines all day and dreamed of being far, far away.

Sometimes she wondered whether mechanical aptitude was something that got handed down by the Force. It shouldn't have, logically speaking, since the Force only affected living things, but Luke had a natural affinity for technology. The same could be said for other Jedi, from old Streen down to Jaina Solo, and even the late Anakin Solo. Whatever it was, Force or simple inborn knack, it was something Mara didn't have, despite her years of technical training. Oh, she could take apart a thrust engine and probably put it back together again if she had a schematic, but she couldn't *feel* her way through its inner workings the same way her husband could.

After helping K'Kruhk find and deliver a fully sealed storage tank of thrust engine fuel to the LAAT/i, Mara sat down on the gunship's lower deck and stretched her legs out across the hangar floor. K'Kruhk used the Force

to pull himself onto the gunship's humped back and talked about mechanical things with Luke. Mara barely listened. She wished there was some way she could check in with Ben right now. She could still sense his presence dimly; he was anxious and worried, but she could tell he was in no immediate danger. That should have made her feel better, but it didn't. She wanted to see her son, to touch him and know for certain he was alright. She believed in the Force well enough, but she believed in her eyes and hands even more.

She couldn't feel Jacen, or Tenel Ka. She didn't know the Hapan Queen well enough to sense her remotely, but she should have been able to touch Jacen. Her nephew seemed to withdraw himself from the Force more and more often of late. It was a trait he'd picked up during the Yuuzhan Vong War, and it seemed that he'd been using it increasingly since the Swarm War. She knew that habit worried Luke, because it made Jacen more difficult for him to read, but Mara was usually willing to overlook it so long as Jacen kept on being a good mentor to Ben.

She was knocked out her reverie when K'Kruhk jumped down on the hangar deck. The floor shook with his weight and she pulled her legs back so her knees touched her breasts.

The big Whiphid looked down on her. "I am sorry to startle you."

"It's okay," she smiled politely. "How's it going?"

"Your husband is making progress, I think," K'Kruhk said. "We should be ready to test the engines soon."

"I'm glad," she said. "But how are we going to get *out* of here?"

K'Kruhk stabbed a claw toward the far end of the hangar. "Those bay doors may open."

"*May* open? I'm guessing you haven't tried."

He shook his head. "I've had no cause to, but I believe the auxiliary power generators should be enough to open them."

"Well, I guess we should figure that out soon," Mara said. She slapped a palm on the gunship's deck. "I'm betting it's been a long time since you flew in one of these?"

"Very long, yet not long enough."

Mara knew she could never understand the full horrors of what K'Kruhk had gone through, which was why she didn't press him to return to the Order the way Luke subtly had. The old Jedi would have to figure it out on his own.

The Whiphid lowered his massive body next to Mara's, and the gunship shifted slightly under his weight. He took off his broad conical hat, held it in his claws, and said, "Your son seems like a fine young man."

"Thank you," she said, surprised by the compliment. "I know Jedi in your time didn't have children."

"Has it caused... complications for the new Order?"

She thought for a moment. "Families are always complicated. But I don't think Luke made the wrong decision."

"You are proud to have born a son."

"I'm proud *of* my son, yes."

"But what of your nephew and his mate?"

Mara's mind wheeled, spun out, then gained traction. "Tenel Ka? She's not Jacen's mate, she's his old friend. They trained at the Academy together."

"Ah, I see. I am sorry. Humans have always been hard for me to read, especially their courtship behavior. And it's been a long time since I've met any humans."

"It's all right. Humans confuse themselves a lot too, especially when courtships are involved." Mara said with a smile, but felt a small sense of disquiet.

While she hadn't been there to see most of it, she knew that Jacen and Tenel Ka had once shared a friendship that had edged toward something more. The Yuuzhan Vong War had pulled them apart, and while they'd never been able to really come together again, it was clear Jacen cared deeply for his old friend, even after she'd taken a 'mate' of her own, as K'Kruhk would put it.

Unless Allana's father really *had* been Jacen after all.

It was hard to believe, but hard to discount. Jacen had always been more concerning with exploring the esoteric nature of the Force than kissing girls. Tenel Ka hardly seemed the type for a quick fling either. Yet *together*, it was possible...

Suddenly the entire hangar rattled. A boom like thunder reverberated through the ship's hull. Then there was another quake, and another boom, and another.

"We're being fired on!" She jumped to her feet. "They're trying to kill our signal!"

"It will be hard to kill," K'Kruhk rose. "The auxiliary communications system is designed to keep broadcasting after the other systems have taken severe damage."

"Great, then they'll bring the whole ship down on our heads. Skywalker! How's that repair job coming along?"

Her husband suddenly dropped from above. The old Grand Master landed nimbly on both feet, only to be knocked off balance when another thunderous quake rocked the hangar. He steadied himself and said, "The engines should be good to go. I'll try and fire them up."

"Great. Let's see if this bird actually flies." She spun on K'Kruhk. "Can we get the bay doors open?"

The old Whiphid seemed distracted. His head was tilted back like he was listening to something. His small yellow eyes seemed to be staring off into nothing.

"Master K'Kruhk!" she said, "Can you open the bay doors?"

"They're attacking my people," K'Kruhk rasped. Anger and dread seemed to collide in his voice. "My people are *dying*."

Mara reached out with the Force and, dimly, felt it too. She could sense the panic and fear of the Shikari tribespeople as the enemy rained down indiscriminate laser blasts on both the assault ship and the entire mountain range.

"Flee!" K'Kruhk shouted to the air. "Run! Go now!"

Behind them, the gunship started to sputter and groan. Mara looked behind her to see burst of flame jump from the aft engines. She looked to the forward cockpit bubble and saw Luke throwing a thumbs-up sign.

"K'Kruhk!" she grabbed the Whipid by the forearm. "We need to open those doors, *now*! It's the only way to save them!"

He jumped at her touch, but said, "Yes, of course! Follow me!"

With surprising speed, the old Jedi bounded across the deck toward one of the control stations. Mara followed, and sent a warning to her husband to get ready to move as soon as possible. Another heavy quake shook the carrier, nearly spilling Mara off her feet, but she regained balance and caught up with K'Kruhk as he reached the station.

The console was not designed for his three-clawed hands, but he was nonetheless able to insert the proper command sequence. At the far end of the hangar, broad doors parted to either side. It was the first time they'd moved for some sixty years, and with every meter moved the metal seemed to shriek and groan in protest.

Then another quake shook the deck. The lights sputtered out and the entire bay fell into terrifying black, save for the thin horizontal band of violet twilight at the far wall. Dimly, Mara could make out the dance of laser blasts flashing through the gap.

Then there was another explosion, and the entire deck pitched forward. The sudden slant of the deck sent Mara and K'Kruhk both falling. Mara caught the deck with her palms but she heard a loud *thwack* as K'Kruhk landed hard. Behind her, she heard the horrible screeched and groans as a deck-full of wrecked starfighters and gunships started sliding downslope.

Her husband shouted in her mind: *Get on board! Now!*

She tried to rise but the sloping deck kept buckling. Above here there was noise and darkness broken by scattered sparks from scraping metal and two lonely beacons of the light: flares from Luke's engines as his gunship slid toward the half-opened bay doors.

Mara reached out through the Force and pulled herself erect. She found K'Kruhk in the dark and pulled him upright as well. The gunship, at the fore of a rush of sliding wreckage, was approaching fast.

"Get ready!" she shouted.

She felt K'Kruhk's assent through the Force. Even in her state of panic she was able to reach deeper within the Force, to slow down time and her senses. She knew where to run to intercept the gunship on its down-slope slide.

She ignited her lightsaber, a beacon for K'Kruhk to follow, and sprinted across the deck.

It took less than three seconds. She kicked off the deck with both legs and used the Force to pull herself through the open side doors of the gunship as it slid past. Her boots hit the moving deck; she instantly lost balance and fell. Beside her, K'Kruhk hit the same deck hard enough to shake it, and in the glow of her lightsaber she saw that he'd braced himself against the wall with one hand.

Luke was shouting something from the cockpit. Over the rush of air and the screaming of tumbling metallic scree, she could just make it out.

“Open the door! Open the door!”

Oh, Sithspit.

“The door!” She shouted, loud enough for K’Kruhk to hear too. “Open the door!”

She had no way of knowing how close they were to the cracked-open bay doors. She couldn’t know how much time before they collided, but it could only have been seconds. She reached out with the Force and found the massive cracked-open doors.

She felt K’Kruhk reach out with his mind and grab hold of the right door. She grabbed the left one and *pulled*.

At first it didn’t budge at all. The massive doors, stationary for decades, had groaned and grounded in protest under their proper motors. Now two Jedi were trying to tear them free with nothing other than the Force.

Something moved. Her door? K’Kruhk’s? She wasn’t sure, but she kept *willing* her door to move. She remembered Jacen pulling the droid fighter from the sky and summoned every piece of herself she could think of to move the bay doors: frank desire to live, her love of Ben, even the anger the Emperor had taught her to summon. She could apologize to Luke for that later.

Through her love and anger and will, the door began to grind open.

It only took seconds.

Then there was a rush of wind and the flash of laser-blasts, and they were soaring through a twilight sky.

The old gunship banked port over the mountain range. Mara held on tight to one wall while K’Kruhk reached up with his free claws and grabbed one of the overhead rails used by clone troops for mid-battle deployments sixty years before. The wind blew his long, gray, tangled fur away from his face, and his small eyes

narrow in concentration, and Mara thought she saw a glimpse of the determined Jedi general he'd once been.

Then she felt his agony tearing through the Force.

"No!" he shouted. "No! No! No!"

Mara looked out the open side of the gunship, even as cold wind stung her eyes and whipped red hair in her face. She saw the everything then: the countless explosions bursting through the old assault ship's hull, the sky filled with dancing little droid starfighters, the jagged mountain peaks draped in shades of blue and violet and black.

She saw, just barely, the small scampering forms of the remaining Shikari as they ran for cover into a rocky crevasse. She reached out with the Force and felt their desperation and panic and confusion. Then she saw a trio of droid fighters dive toward them, laser cannons blazing, and felt their lives flare out of existence as a chain of explosions filled their ravine.

Beside her, K'Kruhk let out an inhuman bellow of anger and despair and fell to his knees.

His agony in the Force was overwhelming, but the flash of nearby lasers and whine of a droid starfighter's engines brought the fear of death back into her.

"Skywalker!" she called to the cockpit, "Do we have guns?"

She got no response. The gunship banked starboard and she reached up to grab the overhead rails with both hands. The droid starfighters didn't seem to be firing at them, but were instead focusing their attacks on *Pride of Chandrila's* explosion-pocked hull. She was surprised for a moment, then realized she shouldn't have been. Whoever was controlling those droid fighters had let them live once before. Now they were doing it again. Somehow, for some reason, they wanted the Jedi alive and trapped on Kal'shikar.

And that meant they probably knew *which* Jedi they were dealing with.

The gunship passed through the tangle of starfighters without taking a single hit. Luke was flying them south now, back to *Jade Shadow's* crash site. Mara stuck her head out the side of the gunship. Tangles of red trailed from her head and danced in her vision as she watched the last moments of *Pride of Chandrila*.

A series of explosions rocked the aft section of the assault carrier. For the first time in sixty years, its massive form shifted against its mountain-slope cradle. Its narrow nose pitched downward further. Even over the sound of lasers and whipping wind, Mara could hear the awful scream of durasteel as it scraped against hard rock. She saw the ship's nose drop lower still, and its aft section arc up to point toward the sky, and finally she saw the whole ship tear free of its mountains and fall nose-first into the deep canyon below.

The explosion lit up the twilight sky like a second sun, but she couldn't take her eyes away.

When the fire slowly dimmed, a massive pillar of black smoke rose into the sky. The droid starfighters still buzzed around the rising smoke like tiny flit-gnats, probably waiting for orders on where to go next, but Mara knew they would not be coming after her.

Their old gunship soared a straight path over the mountain range. Luke said nothing from the cockpit. Beside her, K'Kruhk was on his knees, head bowed. Tangled gray hair fell in front of his long face and hid his shame from view.

Standing on the command deck, staring at the tactical holo that still showed dozens of tiny little blue marks flitting around the ruins of *Chandrila*, all Paks Veem could think to say was, "You let them go."

Dician nodded. Vidious said, "Shooting down their gunship may have destroyed their bodies in the crash. They're only good to us if we can take genetic samples."

"You let the *Skywalkers* live," Veem pressed.

Just hours ago he'd flinched at the thought of killing the old Grand Master and his wife. Now he was disappointed that they'd both survived. He noted the irony but didn't let it bother him. Live Skywalkers meant deadly Skywalkers, and after that attack it was deadly certain they'd be coming here soon.

Alsok, clearly anxious, asked, "Do you have a *plan* for taking them out when they arrive?"

"Of course," Vidious nodded.

"And I don't suppose you'll share it with us?"

"We have methods of dealing with Jedi," Dician said. "*Tested* methods."

Paks Veem was at once dying to know who that *we* meant and terrified of finding out, because at this point he had a pretty good idea of the general picture. Not the *whole* picture, but enough to be properly scared, and to doubt that these Sith were going to kill him once they were done using him.

Well, if he *did* survive, at least he had that DNA-record data-chip in his pocket.

Dician looked at the Devaronian. "They'll be coming soon, I suspect, especially if they have that gunship."

"Best make final preparations then," Vidious nodded. "Recall the fighters."

"Gladly," Dician said. Her dark fingers danced across her datapad, and the blue marks on the tactical holo began withdrawing.

The two Sith (possibly, probably) walked away from the tactical holo and exited through the main blast doors. The two Federation guard droids have them mechanical salutes as they passed through, leaving Veem, Dorcan, and Alsok alone on the bridge.

It was Alsok who sighed and said, "Well, this situation seems to be deteriorating quickly."

"Not if you ask them" Dorcan said. "Those two look pleased as Pantolomin punch."

"Keep it down," Veem muttered, and shifted one eye-stalk toward the droids.

"Don't worry about that." Dorcan pulled back his sleeve to show the slim data-pad around his wrist, the one that controlled the slave circuit on his ship. He tapped a few keys, then pulled his sleeve back down.

"What did you do?" asked Alsok.

"Scrambled their audio sensors. They can't hear us now," Dorcan said.

"Impressive," the Omwati muttered.

"Hey, they brought me on to fix their droids," Dorcan said. "Obviously, I'm gonna fix them to my personal specifications."

"How specific?" Veem asked. "I mean, if you had to, could you override their commands?"

Dorcan chewed his lower lip. "That kind of subroutine would have been hard to slip in without them noticing. Best I could do was an emergency kill-switch to shut them all down."

"Good, then we'll only have two crazy Sith to deal with." Veem shook his head.

"You *sure* they're Sith?" Dorcan pressed. "Or are you guessing?"

"I haven't seen any red lightsabers yet, but I don't know who else they'd be."

Alsok looked confused. "Sith? Those are... the Jedi's enemies, correct? Like Vader?"

"Got it in one," Veem snapped two fingers.

"When the Jedi attack, what will our plan be?" Alsok asked. Veem was surprised at how easily he was using plural pronouns. "Do we run, or do we wait and see who wins the fight?"

"That depends on whether our employers plan to kill us when the fight's done," Veem said.

"Well, the best way to not get dead is to make yourself useful," Dorcan looked at the scientist. "Which means you've probably got the best chance of staying alive. Longer than us, anyway."

"How encouraging," Alsok said dryly.

Veem waved a hand. "Listen, if we plan on running, when, where, and how are we doing it?"

Dorcan tapped his wrist. "Takes just four minutes to get from here to my ship. I can have her engines ready when we get there. *And* I can kill droids, which limits the abilities of our, ah, employers."

"Let the saber-swingers fight it out," Veem nodded. "Sounds like a good strategy to me."

"So is that a plan? Is that our *primary* plan?" Alsok asked.

"I'm good with cutting and running," Veem said.

"Even if we don't get paid?" Dorcan raised an eyebrow.

"You can't get paid if you're dead. Besides, I already got an advance payment for bringing you two into this. Which, I guess, I'm sorry for. For whatever that's worth."

"I haven't been paid yet," Alsok said, prickly.

"Fine, you can get some of my cut. But yourself some pretty new statues or whatever."

"They've probably all been confiscated by the Alliance by now." The scientist tried to scowl, but it made him look petulant. It wasn't like he'd lost his ship, after all. "My career at the University is ruined, now. I'll never be able to work on Coruscant again."

"Good thing you've got a long list of black market clients then," Veem rolled all three eyes. "Listen, do we have a plan? Is this our plan? Cut and run and let the Force-users fight it out?"

Dorcan looked reluctant for a moment, but he nodded. "I don't want to die on this crappy planet. Or *any* crappy planet. I want to die on Zeltros surrounded by many beautiful women."

"Then we're settled," Veem glanced over his shoulder at the tactical holo, which was now empty aside from a topographic display of mountain ridges and a black marker showing the remains of the assault carrier. Through the broad forward viewport, he could make out a few droid starfighters cutting across the dark sky and coming home to roost.

"One more question," Alsok said. "If our main plan fails, who do we side with? Jedi or Sith?"

Two sets of eyes turned to Veem. He wanted to say emphatically *neither*, but that wasn't what they wanted to hear. He sighed and said, "If we turn on the Sith, and they catch us, we're dead. We've already been working against the Jedi, but if they catch us, we'll probably just end up in jail for a really long time."

"Well, that's encouraging," Alsok muttered. "Better jail than death, I suppose."

Dorcan said, "How about this? When the fighting starts, we keep our heads down, and we *wait*. We see who looks like they're gonna win. If it's really a wipe-out for the Sith, then we stay with them and hope we get paid."

"It's two Sith against the Skywalkers," Veem said. "Plus whoever it was that threw a karking starfighter out of the sky. It won't be a wipe-out. I can tell you that."

"Well, I'm the one with the ship and the slave circuit, so I say we wait," Dorcan said with finality.

Alsok looked uncomfortable, but he nodded. "All right. We wait. But at the first chance, we make a run for it."

"Okay, fine," Veem said, though he really wanted to run now and never look back.

Dorcan grinned, almost like he meant it. “Well, it looks like we've got a plan now. Isn't that grand? I love having a plan.”

Veem and Alsok only nodded, without the slightest enthusiasm.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

All things considered, the last thing Ben had been expecting was for his parents to return to *Jade Shadow* in a lumbering, sputtering, ancient Clone Wars gunship.

Still hobbled by the cast around his leg, Ben couldn't leave *Shadow* to greet them like Jacen, but he could sit in the cockpit and watch through the cracked viewport as K'Kruhk and his mother exited from the belly of the gunship, while his father popped open the forward cockpit bubble, jumped into the air, and landed on the rocky ground with spotless grace.

Sometimes, Ben had to admit, his dad could be pretty cool.

A minute later all four Jedi were back inside, and Ben had hobbled down the canted corridor to meet them in the foyer outside the medical bay. Jacen came in first, followed by his mother, and then his father.

"Pretty neat ride, Dad," Ben said.

"Thank you, Ben. That means a lot." Luke said. His tone was honest and tired, but also grim.

K'Kruhk squeezed through the airlock last, and Ben could feel the anguish radiating off of him through the Force. The big old Whiphid had his head bowed low, and his eyes would not lift from the deck.

"What's wrong?" Ben asked. "What happened?"

"Did you hear the explosions from the north?" his mother asked.

"We did. We knew there was a fight." Ben looked to Jacen, who'd probably gotten the run-down already. His cousin just shook his head grimly.

"What happened?" Ben repeated weakly. His eyes kept being drawn toward K'Kruhk's hunched figure, but the old Jedi didn't speak.

"They attacked the carrier with droid fighters," Mara said finally. "We only escaped because your father had gotten it into his head to fix up an old gunship that hadn't flown in sixty years."

"It seemed like a whim at first," Luke admitted. "But it saved our lives."

"The Force must have been speaking," Jacen said.

"I like to think so," Luke nodded. "Unfortunately, there wasn't anything we could do for the Shikari who took us to the crash site."

"I have protected their tribe for three generations," K'Kruhk spoke at last. His voice was a low, mournful groan. "Now they are all gone. They have died for me."

Ben looked again at K'Kruhk. The age and depth of such a loss beggared his mind, and reminded him just how young he really was. He wanted to do something to assuage the old Jedi's pain, but the only thing he could think of was a pathetic 'I'm sorry' that would do nothing to help him.

He looked at the faces of his parents and his cousin, and he understood that they, too, felt like children when faced with the ancient Jedi's grief. That made him feel better in a small way, but he knew it meant nothing for K'Kruhk.

To break the mournful silence, Luke looked at the closed door to the medical bay. "How's Tenel Ka?"

"She woke for a while," Jacen said. "I've put her back into a healing trance. She seems to be mending well."

"Is that your opinion or the medical droid's?" Mara asked.

"Both." He shifted his gaze to Luke. "Well, what happens now?"

Ben's father gave a long sigh. He looked old again, lined and gray. "They've refrained from trying to kill us again and again. That has to mean something."

"From trying to kill *you* maybe," Jacen said darkly.

"Fair," Luke nodded. "The fact that they still haven't attacked *Shadow* means they probably never will. Which means it's up to us to go meet them."

"They're in the Federation control ship?" asked Ben.

"Almost certainly."

"I don't like meeting them in their own lair," Jacen shook his head. "Too many things can go wrong."

"Agreed, but I don't know if we have another choice," Luke said. "They could probably stay there indefinitely. We'll boil once these mountains ranges move dayside. We have to go on the offensive."

"So do you plan on using the gunship?"

"It seems a shame to waste it," Mara said, "Though it doesn't exactly scream 'stealth,' does it?"

K'Kruhk lifted his heavy head for the first time. He fixed small eyes on Luke and said, "There may be a way to approach the control ship without being detected."

Luke frowned. "How is that, Master K'Kruhk?"

"I have never examined the control ship myself, as I've said, but I have passed around it many times. It seems as though it, like the *Chandрила*, crashed between a set of mountain rises."

"Are you saying a canyon runs beneath it?" Mara asked.

"I believe so."

Mara looked thoughtful. "I can try and bring up the telemetry readings *Shadow* took before she went down. I know we were able to get basic scans in from both

major crash sites. Ben, have you gotten the main computer running yet?"

He nodded. "It should work with the backup power generator."

"All right, we'll take a look." Mara turned to her husband. "Think you can get that thing down a canyon undetected, flyboy?"

"I do have experience running trenches," Luke said. "Ben, do you think you can get outside? I want you to have a look at the gunship."

"Why me?" He clanked his cast on the deck. "I'm not easily mobile, dad."

"That's why you're going to be helping me fly that gunship. Your mother and Jacen can lead the ground charge. We'll just be couriers."

"You sure you want to do it that way, Skywalker? There's no telling what's going to be in that ship once we get inside."

"Don't worry, I won't leave you in the lurch," Luke said. He looked at the Whiphid, who had turned his eyes back to the floor. "Master K'Kruhk, we'd appreciate your assistance, if you want to give it."

K'Kruhk blew out thick breath. "It seems there is little else for me to but come with you."

"Thank you," Mara said softly. "Jacen, if you want to stay with Tenel Ka—"

"You'll need all the help you can get." Jacen shook his head. "There's no way I'm not coming."

"Thank you, Jacen." Mara placed a hand on his shoulder. She looked like she wanted to say something else, but didn't.

Instead, Luke told his son, "I'd like to show you what you're getting into. It's pretty rocky outside, so I can help you along if you need it."

"I'm *fine* dad," Ben said tersely. He could call on the Force himself to keep from falling, if it came to that.

His father shrugged, then opened the airlock again. Ben stuffed the crutch in his armpit, hobbled carefully around the mourning old Jedi Master, then followed his father out into the gloom.

She is running. She dodges under low-hanging vines, leaps over logs, pumps her legs until her calf and thigh muscles ache and her lungs cry out for breath and sweat spills down her forehead and blurs her vision. When she stops to wipe her eyes clear her lungs and legs and entire body cry out for her to rest, to lie down, to grant them some relief. She looks behind her and listens, and over the gentle rustle of breeze through tree-leaves she hears the louder, more frantic sound of someone pushing through the undergrowth of Yavin 4's jungles as they follow in her wake

She takes another deep breath and keeps running.

She does not have to run much further. The light of an open sky ahead peeks through the tree-leaves and grows clearer with every layer of vegetation she clears. When she finally bursts past the last tree she skids to a halt, kicking up dirt that sprays and tumbles down the edge of the cliff that has abruptly appeared in front of her.

Beyond the cliff, beneath the perch where she stands, miles of forest canopy sprawl out beneath the orange glow of the gas giant Yavin. In the far distance, the ancient pyramids of the Massassi Temple complex peek through the crests of high trees, their details faded by the humid air and the slanting gold light of late afternoon.

Tenel Ka stands with her hand planted on her hip and takes deep breath, savoring the view as much as she savors the air filling her starving lungs. She listens for the sound of motion through the forest floor behind her, and it is very distant.

She has to wait a long time before Jacen catches up with her.

Yet when he shows up, finally, red-faced and panting, shirt damp and face gleaming with sweat, she is not mad at him. How could she be? Not even Lowbacca would have tried to chase her through the forest like this. He's the only one who would follow her so far.

Truth be told, she enjoys being chased, and Jacen has been doing it for years.

"You did well, friend Jacen," she says, as stiffly as her mirth will allow. "You are to be commended."

Jacen pitches forward, hands on knees, and gasps for breath. He wipes away sweat with his forearm and says, "Tenel Ka, that was nuts."

"I thought it a mildly invigorating exercise," she says, though it was far more strenuous than her typical morning runs through the jungle.

"I mean, couldn't we have walked?" Jacen pleads.

Then she wouldn't have had the thrill of Jacen chasing her, and that wouldn't have done at all. But instead of telling him that she says, "A little effort makes the view all the more rewarding."

"What view?" Jacen asks, still keeled over and gasping for breath.

"Look up, Jacen."

With visible effort, he straightens his body and takes in the panorama for the first time. She can see the awe on his face, but all he says is, "Yeah, I guess that's pretty okay."

She makes a face. "You are joking, yes?"

"Of course," he smiled, wearily. "I'm always joking. You know me."

"Of course," she echoes, though it isn't really true any more. Just a year ago, Jacen was always making pathetic jokes in pathetic attempts to make her smile. His pestering had gradually turned from annoying to

affectionate, and she'd never let him know how much she'd come to enjoy it, though once in a great while she'd rewarded him with the hint of a smile, if he really deserved it.

That was before, though. Things have changed, slowly, gradually, without either of them noticing at first and certainly without them meaning for it to happen. They are not fourteen years old any more, and while sixteen hardly makes them seasoned adults, they have been starting to take on more adult responsibilities. Tenel Ka has been going to Hapes more often, and while she never enjoys those trips, she at least savors the opportunity to spend time with her mother and father. As for Jacen, he has been spending more time with his uncle. Master Skywalker is planning to rebuilt the old Jedi Council and Jacen has concerns about it. Jacen has concerns about lots of things recently, most of them having to do with the philosophical aspects of the Force.

Metaphysics have never much interested Tenel Ka, but she always knew there was a thoughtfulness beneath Jacen's goofy bluster. Watching it come to the fore has been interesting, but she is afraid she does not get to see Jacen as much as she used to.

That is why she dragged him on this trip through the jungle today. It is not often that are on Yavin 4 at the same time nowadays, and she wants to savor this moment. She wants to share this view. She discovered it years ago, and for a long time it was her special, personal, private place, a secret she guarded carefully just as she had once guarded the secret of her royal upbringing.

But she's a little older now, and she's realized that some secrets are meant to be shared, especially if it's with one special person.

She wants to tell Jacen this as the two of them sit down on the edge of the cliff, their feet dangling over

the vast forest below. He sits at her right side, at the edge of arm's length. Right now they are both hot and sweating and panting, but she wishes he would move just a little closer.

"So," he wheezes, "How did you find this place, anyway?"

"I explore often, Jacen," she reminds him.

"I don't even remember seeing this cliff from the ground, or from the top of the Temple."

"We are quite a distance from the there."

"I can see that. I can't believe you dragged me so far."

"I did not drag you," she says with the hint of a smile.

"You followed of your own accord. You're to be congratulated, friend Jacen."

"Thanks, I guess, but I think my legs are going to hate me tomorrow. And my lungs."

"Do not worry. I will always be fond of you, no matter how your body feels."

He glances at her sideways. "A joke?"

"Perhaps. Or the truth."

"Let's say it's both, then." Jacen gives that slanted grin he inherited from his father. She understands how it has wooed princesses in the past.

She smiles back; no bared teeth, just a curve of lips. Jacen looked away suddenly, awkwardly. His body goes stiff and she can feel him clam up in the Force.

She looks at the forest and tries to stifle her own feelings. She does not like being this anxious. She never has. It is why she was always so reluctant to admit to herself how much she enjoyed Jacen's pestering, back when he used to pester her instead of ponder the loftier nature of the Force.

She knows she could tell him, right now, that this is her special place, which she had never shown anyone else and never thought she would show anyone else, and that all this time she has been saving it for him without

even realizing it. She could tell him how much she misses him nowadays, and how she wishes they could be together every day like they did when they were thirteen or fourteen.

But she asks herself what good it would do. Jacen has his duties now, and she has hers. Admitting some twinges of affection would not change the broader movements of the galaxy, which always seem to have something else planned for them, as though it is determined to keep them apart.

She scoots a few centimeters closer, but does not touch him. She says, "It is a wonderful view, is it not?"

"Yeah," he admits, not looking at her, "You sure know how to pick 'em, Tenel Ka."

He watches the sun slowly sink over the treetops and she pretends to watch them too but really she watches him out of the corner of her eye and wishes that she could tell him everything here, and that just by spilling the truth the universe could rearrange itself to give her the thing she's wanted for so long without admitting it to herself or to him.

The sun goes slowly down, and she does not tell him.

She never did.

She never did until it was too late for them both.

*When her bittersweet dream ended and she woke, reluctantly, from her healing trance, her eyes opened on an empty room. The medical bay aboard *Jade Shadow*, once again. The little spherical medical droid hovered silently in one corner of the room, watching her with a dark glassy eye.*

With effort, she pushed herself upright. Pain stabbed into her gut, but it did not hurt as much as she was expecting. She sat upright with her legs stretched out before her and tried twisting her torso, testing her abdominal muscles and testing the pain.

She was in mid-twist when the door slid open and Jacen appeared. Her face lit up in a smile, but it faltered slightly when she saw that he was not alone. After Jacen stepped into the room he was followed by his aunt, who looked dirty and tired but also relieved to see her patient alive and well.

"Thank you," Tenel Ka said simply.

"No need for that," Mara said. She came up on Tenel Ka's left side and placed a steadying hand on her shoulder. "How are you feeling?"

"I have improved greatly." She nodded at Jacen, who sidled at her right. "Jacen's abilities amplified my own healing trance. I'm sure your medical droid helped also."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"What has happened since I went to sleep?"

"Oh, lots of things," Mara sighed. "But the important one is that we've found the people who shot down both our ships. We're going after them."

"They're hiding out in a crashed Trade Federation droid control ship," Jacen added.

"You intend to attack a capital ship with only four people?"

"Four *Jedi*," Jacen reminded her.

"It should be five." She tried to swing her legs off the side of the bed, but Jacen and Mara both grabbed her shoulders.

She frowned and tried to jerk free, but Jacen said, "You've been wounded, badly. You have to rest up."

She gave him a cool, firm glare. "Friend Jacen, you know why we came to this planet. Whoever is in that ship is a threat to my family and I will *not* let them escape."

"I won't either," he said firmly. "I can take care of this, Tenel Ka. Trust me."

She did trust Jacen, more than any being in the whole galaxy, but she had prized self-sufficiency her entire life

even more than she prized loyalty to her friends. She couldn't bear laying on this bed while the people closest to her risked their lives on her behalf.

She certainly wasn't going to stay in bed when the fate of her daughter was on the line.

Jacen already knew that, so she turned her attention to Mara. "Your son is already injured, is he not?"

Mara's eyes darkened. "He broke his leg. But he's not boarding the ship with us. He's helping Luke fly an old gunship we recovered. We should be able to squeeze it through a canyon and hit them from below, where their sensors can't find us."

"Then you plan to take on an entire ship with *three* Jedi? That is utter madness."

Before Mara could object again, Jacen said, "How about this? I can put you into another healing trance. We'll wake you up just before we ready to set out and have the medical droid give you a look-over. If it gives you the clear, you can come."

His eyes darting to Mara, pleading with her to agree. The older woman nodded with clear reluctance. "All right. But only if the med droid gives you clearance."

"That is fair," Tenel Ka said. "Doctor Jacen, please put me to sleep now, so I may maximize healing time."

"You've got it," he laughed lightly. "Now lay back and close your eyes."

She lowered her body so it was flat against the bed. Her muscles ached with the motion but she kept the pain from her face. She closed her eyes and felt Jacen press a cool hand against her forehead. When she felt him touching her with the Force, urging her into a deep sleep, she did not resist.

In truth, she savored the chance to dream.

Mara was relieved when Tenel Ka closed her eyes and allowed Jacen to help her into another healing trance.

She well what Tenel Ka was feeling; the pain of being wounded, the frustration of not being able to do anything, and most of all, the agony of feeling helpless when your child was in danger.

Her relief evaporated, however, when she and Jacen stepped out of the medical bay and into the waiting room, where K'Kruhk was still weighing down a bench. The Whiphid's head was bowed and she could feel the naked grief emanating off of him from the Force. He'd attempted to hide his emotions before, but after the loss of his Shikari tribe he'd ceased to care about his barrier.

She could tell from the expression on Jacen's face how deeply he, too, sensed K'Kruhk's pain. Mara felt spectacularly helpless, but also reluctant to simply leave the old Jedi alone in his pain, as if he were a burden she didn't want to bother with.

It was Jacen who asked, "Do you think you'll be able to participate in this mission, Master K'Kruhk?"

It struck Mara as needly blunt and careless with K'Kruhk's emotions. Mara wanted to snap at Jacen but she held her tongue.

The old master did not seem offended. He breathed out heavily and raised his head so he could fix his small yellow eyes on the two Jedi standing over him.

"Many times have I suffered loss, but I have always kept moving. Sometimes, though, I wonder if there is a point to any of it."

"I know it hurts," Jacen said in a softer tone, "But you have to find a way to draw strength from that pain."

"Young man, I do not mean offense, but I believe I have had more pain in my life than you have in your few decades."

Mara felt Jacen rankle in the Force, and truthfully couldn't blame him. Jacen was barely thirty years old but had seen his own brother killed and endured horrible tortures under the Yuuzhan Vong. If any living Jedi

knew pain, it was Jacen. Sometimes she thought he knew it too well.

Jacen calmed himself and said, still gently, "I can't imagine what you've gone through, Master K'Kruhk, and I can't presume to lecture you, but ultimately you have to look to the future."

"The future," K'Kruhk shook his head slowly. "The future passed me by more than half a century ago."

"Did it pass you by, or did you hide from it?"

Again Mara wanted to snap at Jacen to be quiet, but the Whiphid seemed to consider the question honestly.

"Some of both, perhaps. I have spent decades on this world, with the Shikari, and to be truthful I did not ever want it to end. I never thought about a future beyond this twilight."

"Master K'Kruhk," Mara said softly, "I think the future has found you. You can't hide any more. You have to chose how you're going to face that future."

Jacen nodded slightly, glad that Mara had picked up his trail. He said, "The pain in your past is never going to go away. This loss is going to leave a scar inside you that can never heal, a scar that probably has a lot of company. I have scars too, Master. I saw my own brother die, and that is going to hurt me for the rest of my life. But the thing about scars it that they heal tougher than what was there before."

"They also deaden sensation," K'Kruhk said. "Sometimes, they make it so you do not *want* to feel again."

"Master K'Kruhk," said Jacen, "Right now, we are about to-"

K'Kruhk held up a clawed hand. "I understand, young man. You want my help and you shall have it."

"You can't help other people if you're the one in pain. I need you to help yourself. Tenel Ka's doing that right now, but her hurt is physical. Yours is tougher to cure."

K'Kruhk regarded Jacen carefully. "You are wise, for such a young human."

"I'm not wise," Jacen said, "Or young."

Mara knew he meant what he said.

"Perhaps. You humans have always been... difficult to read. Master Twoseas..." He paused, sighed, and lowered his head again. "Lillit Twoseas was my first Master, and my first loss. Sit down, please. I want to tell you about my first loss, and my other losses. I want to tell this story to *someone*, in case I fall, so that someone in the galaxy remembers their names.

"Sit, please, and listen..."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

K'KRUHK'S TALE

There are many times when I should have died. I fell to General Grievous's blades on Hypori. I tumbled down the duracrete canyons of Coruscant. I watched as my first Master, Lillit Twoseas, fell on Yinchorr, and felt certain she had died in my place. Years later every friend I had was exterminated, and yet I lived on to carry their fire.

Sometimes it feels that I have only survived through the sacrifice of so many other lives.

Master Twoseas was small, even for a human, and beings unfamiliar with my padawan's braid assumed she was the learner and I her master. In truth she was a lover of peace, as gentle as any being as I have ever known, and in my youth I wanted nothing more than to be like her, serene and at one with the Force. Though there were rumblings of disquiet within the Republic in those years, I, like the rest of the Order, assumed that we would continue the path we had followed for generations. I believed, with the certainty of youth, that it would be my destiny to follow Master Twoseas' path and teach my own padawans in turn to follow the way of the Force and attain an inner peace.

When Master Twoseas died, I began to question my future for the first time.

The events that followed worried all beings in the Republic, but I felt more stricken than most. The fall of Chancellor Valorum's government, the siege of Naboo, and unrest in the Outer Rim all seemed to me assaults on the system of order and justice the Jedi had upheld for a thousand generations. Without Master Twoseas as my paragon, I felt adrift and helpless. I tried to find refuge in the wisdom of Master Yoda and the others on the Jedi Council, but they could only do so much to assuage my doubts.

I began to feel better when I was officially elevated to Knighthood. In my accomplishment I felt that something must be orderly and just in the galaxy after all. I looked forward to becoming a Master and taking a padawan of my own. I dared think that I had found my destiny after all.

The Clone Wars shook the Jedi order to its foundations. We, who had embraced peace for a thousand years, found ourselves leading armies for the first time since the Lord Hoth fell on Ruusan. Some Jedi, like Master Windu or Quinlan Vos, could tame the aggression they had buried within and make themselves into capable warleaders, but I could not.

Nonetheless, I was made into a general and sent to command troops. I was appointed a Master as well, right as the war began. Instead of receiving a padawan to teach, as I'd long desired, I was given a platoon of clone soldiers. These beings had been grown in tubes rather than born from woman, and they had been raised for the sole purpose of killing. They had the potential to think and feel and ponder and know, just like any other sentients, but because of this horrible war, they knew only violence and death.

The Grand Army of the Republic did not *feel* dark. The clones did not emanate anger or the desire to dominate. There were rumors that the Separatists were being led

by the Sith, so Yoda and the Council deemed the war a necessary evil in order to discover and destroy that greater enemy. Nonetheless, when we Jedi took command as generals, I felt as though we were leading an army of darkness.

On Teyr, nearly my entire platoon was killed. I felt as broken as I had after Master Twoseas' death. Once more, I felt like others had died in my place. Unable to lead an army of slaves to pointless deaths, I put down my lightsaber and went to join other Jedi who had given up the war. To my shock and horror, their leader, Sora Bulq, had fallen under the sway of Count Dooku. I could not stand to be a traitor, so I returned to the Jedi Order and fought once more, though I refused to command clone troops into battle.

So I fought in my own way. I fought on Hypori, Saleucami, and a dozen other backwater planets on which the Clone Wars ground on. Because the war took place far from the bright center of things, I believe the politicians and bureaucrats who led the Republic did not understand the horrors of the war. And, I believe, our Jedi Council failed to anticipate the real threat until it was too late.

When Order 66 came, and the clone soldiers turned on us, I survived. I swung my lightsaber and cut down men who were only following orders, who had been told by their commanders that the Jedi had tried to overthrow the Chancellor and must be executed as traitors. As with Master Twoseas and my platoon on Teyr, I sacrificed more brave beings so that I could survive.

Flight came after that. Lord Vader and the Emperor would not rest until they had extinguished the Jedi's fire, and they hunted us relentlessly. For my part, a twist of events made me guardian of a whole host of younglings. Finally, I had the padawans I had always longed for, but instead of teaching them to commune with the Force

and find inner peace, I had to fight and sometimes kill to protect a herd of confused, frightened children, whose nascent Force powers did nothing to avail them or even help them understand the horrors of what was happening to the Jedi. They were the ultimate innocents, under death sentence for the crime of simply being born a certain way. In protecting them, I'd found a sense of purpose that had long eluded me.

Finally, it seemed I had the destiny I'd long desired. Sometimes I think there is nothing worse than receiving what you have so long desired, only to find it twisted into something you never would have wished for.

Our flight was a long one, but eventually we found refuge in a hidden temple erected on Arkinnea. It had been built centuries before, as a redoubt for Jedi in case dark times like these came. Our arrival at the temple brought great relief, especially for the children, and I hoped they would find healing and peace of mind after such a traumatic flight.

But I could not simply hide on Arkinnea. My duty, my destiny, was not yet complete. I had to make sure the younglings remained protected. I entrusted my padawans to Master Zao, took a ship, and began scouring the sector for signs of Imperial activity. Arkinnea was in the Outer Rim, where the newly-made Empire was struggling to finish off the remaining Separatists and their allies. I thought, at first, that our location on the fringe would keep us beyond the prying eyes of the New Order. Instead, it drew death upon us.

It happened when I was in my ship patrolling the Pavlax System, which neighbored Arkinnea. I knew that system was home to a group of rebels, loosely allied with the Separatists and now fighting a localized war against the Empire. The rebels, from what I could tell, fought bravely, sparing civilian lives and concentrating their efforts on hit-and-run attacks on Imperial military

installations. Through the intelligence sources I had slowly gathered, I learned that these rebels had made their secret base in the Pavlax System. Through my patrols I knew that their base was on the nightside of an uninhabited moon orbiting the fifth planet in the system, a red gas giant.

At the time, I had been pondering whether or not to alert the rebels as to the presence of the hidden temple. The rebels seemed honorable and it could be useful to have an ally against the Empire. At the same time, our younglings couldn't offer them any fighting support, and alerting even a few rebel leaders meant a great security risk if any of them were captured.

I was in the outer edges of the Pavlax System, pondering for the fourth or fifth time whether to comm their moon base and reveal myself, when I intercepted a transmission. It was a tight-beam case, well-encrypted, and it was through luck or the Force that I caught it. I had already obtained updated Imperial encryption codes, and I was able to read the message.

The Empire, it seemed, had narrowed the location of the rebel base to a handful of systems, including Pavlax and Arkinnea. Stealth probes were going to be sent to all of those systems in order to root out the rebels once and for all.

I was suddenly faced with a choice. I could fly back to the hidden temple, gather Master Zao and the younglings and flee, though I knew that we had found a special place on Arkinnea and that we might not find another. I knew that if we ran we would be ultimately faced with two possibilities: we would either be caught in the net the Imperials were dragging through the sector, making our flight useless, or we would be on the run for months or years. My younglings, each of whom I'd come to think of as a padawan I'd long desired, would be broken beyond repair.

I was resigning myself to that second destiny when a thought came to me unbidden. In my despair the Dark Side whispering to me, and it told me that I could protect the temple and all my padawans with one simple, anonymous call to the closest Imperial ship. I could tell them where the rebel base was.

As soon as I had that horrible thought, I knew I had to decide quickly, before the Imperials launched their probes.

I knew how horrible it was, but I could not bat it away. I ran through different possibilities in my head. I thought that I might call the Imperials first, then call the Pavlax moonbase and tell them to evacuate, but that would not accomplish my goal. If anything, the rebels scattering would just encourage the Imperials to search nearby systems harder.

The hidden temple would only be protected if every last rebel was exterminated.

In my head, I tried to remember everything I had heard about the Dark Side from Masters Twoseas and Windu and Yoda, but their wisdom did not come to me as I sat trapped in my ship, overcome by panic and despair. I tried to remember the fates of good Jedi like Sora Bulq or Quinlan Vos, who had been tempted by evil or outright fallen under its sway, and I found myself thinking that I was not like them. I was not motivated by anger to selfishness. I was not trying to bring the universe to heel and fulfill a lust for power. What I was about to do, I was doing to save lives, to protect innocent children, to keep the dying fires of the Jedi alive for future generations.

When I made the call to the Imperials, I told myself that I was doing it for the Force.

My ship remained in the outer edges of the Pavlax System for the next six hours. I stayed to watch everything. I felt I owed the rebels that much as their

executioner. I watched as two new *Victory*-class star destroyers appeared in orbit over Pavlax Five. They attacked the base from orbit first, pounding it with their turbolasers. All ships trying to escape were shot down. When the battle was over they sent in shuttles to comb the wreckage and execute and survivors, and when that grisly clean-up was complete the two star destroyers turned around and jumped out of the system.

I remained unnoticed the entire time.

When the slaughter was done, I remained in my ship. I had no desire to do anything or go anywhere. I let the knowledge of what I had done sink into me, overwhelm me, and I knew I had committed a crime for which there could be no forgiveness. I knew I could not go back to the hidden temple and face the younglings with so much blood on my hands. I could be no one's teacher now. I had no choice but exile.

Yet I also knew that if I disappeared without a trace, Master Zao would send out search parties, and those parties might be spotted by the Empire. In order to fully protect the hidden temple, I decided to jump back to Arkinnea, explain what I had done to Master Zao as briefly as possible, then leave forever.

It took me several more hours to work up my courage. Finally, I restarted my engines and jumped back to Arkinnea.

When I dropped into orbit I instantly knew something was wrong. I could feel it in the Force. I checked my scanners and saw no ships in the system, but when I flew into the planet's atmosphere I could feel the residue of panic, dread, and despair great battles always left behind.

As I flew over the smoking ruin of the hidden temple, I knew that my crime, made in arrogance and despair, had been for nothing. The Imperials had searched the

nearby systems anyway, found the settlement on Arkinnea, and eradicated it.

I landed on the outskirts of the temple. I scoured the ruins, though what I hoped to find, or not find, I cannot say. The wreckage was filled with bodies. The Imperials had not even deigned to bury the corpses of their victims. All of them were charred beyond definite recognition, but most of them were small enough to be identified as children.

It was worse than Yincorr and Teyr, worse than anything I had ever experienced. In my despair I wanted nothing more than to die with Master Zao, Chase Piru, and all the other padawans I had failed to save.

I had thought it was my destiny to save them, you see. For my destiny, I was willing to commit any crime. For my destiny, I was able to cross the Dark Side.

And in the end, everything I had ever done- my years of training, my crises of conscience, my arrogant need to believe that I could protect these innocent children- had all been for nothing.

Nothing at all.

But I did not die, because I knew that would have been the ultimate surrender to despair. Instead I got back into my ship and left my crimes and failures behind. I remembered one of the reports I had intercepted earlier, a summary of a battle over the planet Kal'shikar. I knew the world had been devastated, and was now abandoned, and would probably never be touched by visitors again. Like on Kal'shikar would be harsh, but it was harshness I deserved.

I thought I would spend the rest of my life in exile on Kal'shikar, and for sixty years nothing happened to challenge that belief. I stood guard over three generations of Shikari, and I felt like I had a purpose, though after Arkinnea I could no longer believe in destiny.

Now even my purpose has been taken from me. I do not mean offense, but I wish you Jedi had never come to this world. I wish I could have been left alone to march through the twilight until I die.

I have found something worse than getting what you long desired, only to find it twisted and awful. The worst thing in life is being stripped of your illusions. Without the lies of destiny or purpose, there is nothing but despair.

And that, young Jedi, is all you have left me.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

When K'Kruhk ended his tale he did not lift his head or look them in the eyes. He simply stopped talking. His long head remained bowed, and his claws were clasped in his lap. He said nothing more.

The enormous tragedy of K'Kruhk's tale left Jacen feeling physically weak. As the Whiphid had told his story he'd let his despair emanate freely through the Force, and when he'd described his agonized decision to betray the rebels Jacen had almost felt like he, too, was trapped in that cockpit, alone in empty space, making the awful choice.

In a way, K'Kruhk's choice reminded him of what his grandfather had gone through. Anakin Skywalker had submitted himself to Emperor Palpatine in hopes of saving the life of his wife, and as he'd watched R2-D2's recordings of some of those events, he'd felt twinges of sympathy for a man who was trying to protect the person he loved, even if it meant crossing the boundaries laid down by a Jedi Council that had done nothing but disrespect and abuse him.

But like Anakin Skywalker, K'Kruhk had ultimately failed to save the thing he'd been trying to protect.

Jacen thought he knew things about pain. He thought he knew about hard choices. He had experienced plenty of them both during the Yuuzhan Vong War, but none

of them had driven him into a lifetime of self-enforced exile.

Against such horrors and such bottomless despair, Jacen could think of nothing to say.

The three Jedi sat together in the foyer, avoiding each other's eyes. For a while, no one dared to speak. It was, ultimately, Mara who broke the silence.

"For a long time," she said, "I thought it was my destiny to kill my husband."

That got K'Kruhk to raise his head. "I do not understand."

"I wasn't raised a Jedi. I was raised by the Emperor. He made me into his creature." Mara's pale hands were folded in her lap; her fingers twisted together. "I was a child at the time. I didn't question it. And when he died, his last command kept echoing in my head: *You will kill Luke Skywalker*. I thought that I existed for only one thing. And you know what I found out?"

When neither Jacen nor K'Kruhk responded, she said, "Having a destiny can limit you. Any life is full of possibility, even if you were brainwashed by a Sith Lord as a kid. Devoting yourself to one purpose robs you of so many other possibilities."

It was true, Jacen knew. He also knew that without purpose, or destiny, or whatever you called it, a life would be meaningless. After the Yuuzhan Vong War, he'd spent five years exploring the galaxy, looking for new ways to experience the Force and (though he knew it was futile) come close to touching it in the way he had during his battle with Onimi. Yet as time grew on, he'd started becoming bored with even the most exotic Force-users. Curious wandering had not been enough.

In a sad, almost twisted way, a part of him was glad for his vision of the Dark Man and Allana. That, finally, had given him something to work toward, something to order his life around. He had already given up his

relationship with his sister to protect Allana, and he wondered how much more he would give up for his destiny.

He knew, deep down, that he was ready to sacrifice a lot more.

Jacen couldn't bring himself to say this to the other Jedi, and wouldn't if he could. Instead K'Kruhk said, "Sometimes I wonder if I am able to live without a purpose. Even when I thought I was leaving dreams of destiny behind forever on Kal'shikar, I appointed myself protector the Shikari. In truth, I doubt they ever needed me at all. Other tribes have survived without my guidance. Perhaps I was protecting them for my sake, for my vanity, for my *need* to have some kind of destiny..."

K'Kruhk trailed off again. Mara placed one small hand on his massive shoulder. "There's nothing *wrong* with having a purpose, K'Kruhk. Everyone needs something to focus their lives. After I realized I *didn't* want to kill Luke, I felt aimless for a long time. I didn't know what to do with myself. Ever after I *married* Luke instead of killing him, I felt... lost for a while."

She spoke in a low, sensitive voice. Jacen knew she was revealing something deep and personal, something she might have even shared with her husband.

"It took me a while to find something worth devoting myself to, but I have," she continued. "I think I've found my purpose, or destiny, or whatever, and it's a *lot* better than the one Palpatine gave me. Maybe it limits me sometimes, but I don't mind that, not any more."

"What have you found?" asked K'Kruhk. "What is *your* destiny?"

"It's simple." Her voice was suddenly firm. "*Ben* is my destiny. I'm going to raise my son right. I'm going to protect him. No matter what."

"And would you... take lives to protect Ben?"

"I would," she said firmly. Jacen was impressed by her lack of hesitation. "I wouldn't savor it, and I'll do everything to avoid it, but if I have to, yes, I would kill to protect my son."

"I have known those feelings... They brought out a darkness in me."

"I'm a little more comfortable with the shadowy sides of the Force than most Jedi," Mara said. "The upside of experience is that you learn how to control yourself better. I know what the Dark Side feels like, and I know how to toe the line."

K'Kruhk said nothing. Neither did Jacen. Mara knew his view on the so-called Dark and Light Sides of the Force, views he'd inherited from his teacher Vergere. His fight with Onimi and his five years of wandering had further convinced him that those two sides were just names the Jedi stuck on aspects of the Force they did and didn't like, and that the all-encompassing nature of the universe went far beyond such simple definitions.

Yet most Jedi, even ones as unorthodox as Mara, still defined their actions in such dualistic terms. It was something he found fascinated and frustrating at the same time. More than anything, it made him feel very alone.

K'Kruhk shifted his yellow eyes to Jacen. "What of you, young Jedi? Have you been touched by destiny?"

He drew a breath and tried to hide his feelings in the Force. Yes, he had been touched by destiny. He knew he would undergo great pain protecting Allana from the Dark Man. He knew he would have to sacrifice much and had sacrificed already. During the Swarm War, he had been nearly convinced that his old friend Raynar Thul, captured and twisted by the Killiks, was the Dark Man, and he'd urged Luke to kill him.

He understood now that Raynar had been as much a victim as anyone, and while he was glad Luke had

spared his friend's life, he did not regret what he'd urged his uncle at the time. If he'd faced off with Raynar then he would have killed him, not out of malice or anger but out of duty to the destiny thrust upon him.

If he'd been in K'Kruhk's place he would have made the same choice, though he knew better than to say it. If he'd been in his grandfather's place...

That was a choice he was thankful not to have been forced to make.

He aware that Mara and K'Kruhk were both watching him expectantly, and that he was drawing the silence out too long. So he said, "I'm sorry, but no. I don't think I have been. I spent a long time wandering around, looking for one, but what I haven't found I doubt I ever will."

He'd said something similar to Ben once, when they'd first met after his five-year journey. It had been a lie then, too, but he'd said it with the ring of conviction. Until he'd knelt in front of the Pool of Knowledge, he'd believed it truth.

"Then what guides you, young Jedi?" asked K'Kruhk.

Jacen considered possible lies. There were a lot to chose from. "I want to be the best Jedi I can be. I want to help others, and guide them. I want to follow the will of the Force as best I can. It's not something you plan on, specifically. You have to feel the way the river is flowing, and swim with it."

K'Kruhk looked at him for a long time but said nothing. There was a scrutiny in those little eyes Jacen couldn't escape, and he didn't look away. He did not feel K'Kruhk probing him with the Force, but he still felt helpless and naked beneath the ancient Jedi's gaze.

Finally, K'Kruhk said, "You may be the wisest of all, young Jedi." He shifted his gaze back to Mara. "When we go meet our enemy, what will be your purpose? To

uncover their secrets? To protect the Jedi order and the Hapan Queen? Or to protect your son?"

"All of those things," she said firmly.

"Very well. They will be mine also." K'Kruhk placed his clawed hands on his knees. "I was a failure of a Master. It seems I have had much to learn all these years. Now, young Jedi, you will have to teach me. It is strange that, after all this time, after so much loss, I want nothing more than to be a padawan again. The very thought, in fact, gives me hope."

The past week had put Ben Skywalker through a lot of experiences that he'd never expected to go through. Flying off a moving speeder and breaking his leg had just been the start. Going on a tour his mom's old smuggler friends was another, and crash-landing on some desolate twilight planet that hadn't seen contact since the Clone Wars was probably the biggest.

Still, it was a special kind of weird to be crammed into the secondary cockpit of an ancient LAAT/i gunship with your father, listening to him explain to you how to pilot a ship he barely knew anything about. Again and again, Luke had to stop his lectures to examine the controls, punch a few buttons, and two times accidentally fire the engines, just to make sure he was giving his son the proper instruction.

It was a strange lecture, and sometimes amusing, but most of all Ben felt appreciative of his father for showing this level of trust in him. So often his father treated him as a child, impressionable and fragile, but this time Luke wasn't talking down, and his eyes and tone constantly communicated that he was placing great trust in Ben's abilities to learn and to fly this old ship.

As Luke finished up his educational presentation, Ben asked, "Why are you telling my everything about flying, Dad? Aren't you the one who's going to be piloting it

through the canyon? You're going to be in the primary cockpit, right?"

"I am," Luke nodded, "Because I have certain experience with running trenches. But you can pilot this gunship from the copilot's cockpit too, if I pass controls over to you."

"Why would you do that?" Ben could think of a few possibilities, none of them good.

Luke's expression got appropriately grave. "Ben, the plan right now is to fly right down the gullet of that ship. We're all going to be risking our lives, but I don't want yours to be in any more danger than it has to be. You might need to take command of the ship and escape."

"Dad, I'm not going to leave you behind."

Luke put a hand on his shoulder. His grip was so strong it hurt. "Ben, I might order you to do just that."

"Dad, I won't-"

"Ben! Listen to me!" He'd never seen his father so serious. "If I tell you to go, you go. You understand?"

He couldn't help but think that if Luke gave Jacen that order, his cousin would tell his dad to shove it out an airlock, then find some brilliant way to save the day. Ben wanted to believe he could do the same, but the awkward cast on his leg was proof of his own limitations.

So he said, "Okay, Dad, I'll do what you say."

He didn't know if he meant it, but Luke seemed to accept that answer. "I'm hoping it won't come to it, Ben, but if anyone survives this mission I want it to be you."

There was gravity in his father's gaze and grip that made his throat go dry. So far on this mission, crazy as it had been, he'd only really felt the fear of death when *Jade Shadow* had plunged toward the planet's surface, and that had been an adrenaline-shot of panic.

This fear was deeper. It settled inside of his chest and made his breath sharp, and he knew it wouldn't go away

any time soon. Sometimes Jacen said that adulthood was carrying burdens that eat you from the inside, and learning to live with them. This might have been what his cousin had been talking about.

His father sensed his disquiet, but didn't move to placate him, which showed Ben just how serious the situation was.

Ben swallowed and said, "You can trust me, Dad. Honest."

"I do trust you Ben," Luke said softly. There seemed to be the tiniest note of surprise in his voice.

Father and son held each other's eyes for a long, hard moment. Finally, Luke took his hand off Ben's shoulder. He pivoted his body and lowered himself down the short ladder that led from the cockpit to the holding area. Ben, slightly awkward for his clanking cast, lowered himself down the ladder too. His crutch was right where he'd left it, propped against the port-side swing doors.

Hobbling across the rocky terrain back to *Jade Shadow* was slow and difficult, but he got the whole way without having to draw on the Force to keep upright. On the way out his dad had propped him up several times and it had rankled, but this time Luke let him support himself.

When they got back inside *Shadow* they heard motion and voices from the area near the medical bay. Luke and Ben shuffled and shifted their way down the crooked corridor to the foyer. All three Jedi were standing in the mid-sized room, their postured awkwardly shifted to retain balance. Jacen was pulling a black fiber-woven jacket over his burnt and tattered overshirt, while Mara was strapping on a pair of shoulder-slung holsters. K'Kruhk, still dressed in a robe of tattered furs, was examining his lightsaber. The door to the medical bay behind them was open, but he couldn't see the bed where Tenel Ka had been laid.

When Mara saw them enter, she said, "Good timing, boys. I was just about to call you."

"I'm sorry," Luke said, "I just wanted to make sure Ben understood the situation."

Mara glanced at her son, then at her husband. Some understanding seemed to pass between them, something Ben didn't quite understand, but her expression softened when she looked back to Ben. "Do you think you can fly that ship if you have to?"

"I'll do my best," he said, as confidently as he could.

That seemed to be enough for Mara. She nodded as she stuffed two stout hold-out blasters into her holsters, so that their handled juttied out on either side of her breasts.

Luke asked, "What's Tenel Ka's status?"

"The medical droid's checking on her now," Mara said. "She wants to come with us."

The displeasure was clear on Luke's face, but Jacen said, "You can't expect her to sit here and do nothing while the rest of us risk our lives. Besides, whatever's going on here, Tenel Ka's child is at the heart of it."

"She's wounded, and badly," Luke said. "Healing trance or not, I can't in good conscience—"

"If Ben were in danger, would you tell Aunt Mara to stay put?"

Luke's jaw opened, shut again.

Ben's mother raised an eyebrow and said, "Boy's got you there, Skywalker."

"Indeed he does," said a voice from the doorway to the medical bay. Tenel was standing upright, sole arm behind her stiff back, head tilted slightly. Were it not for the loose white medical garb she was wearing, she would have looked as regal as the queen she was.

Ben could tell his father wanted to object, but he simply shook his head and said, "Well, you've technically resigned from the Jedi Order, so I can't pull rank on you, can I?"

"Fact," Tenel Ka nodded curtly. "Nonetheless, I would appreciate your blessing."

"Are you sure you're up for it, Tenel Ka?"

"Absolutely. I will not rest until I am sure my child is safe. Would you?"

"Then I suppose there's no stopping you," Luke admitted. "Mara, you probably have something to fit Tenel Ka, so help her get dressed. Ben, Jacen, let's give *Shadow* one quick check-over while we're waiting."

"Fascinating," K'Kruhk said. He was still holding his lightsaber tentatively between his claws, still staring at it, like he was wondering if he could really use it after all this time.

"What is it, Master K'Kruhk?" Tenel Ka regarded the old Jedi.

"When I was a Jedi, it was believed that deep attachments, especially those of family, were dangerous."

"They can be," Jacen said, with bitter knowing. "They can also make you stronger, too. Like anything else, it depends on how you use them."

"I suppose I am about to find out." K'Kruhk buried his lightsaber within some pocket of his robe, then stooped to pick up his conical straw hat from the bench. He placed it on his head and said, "I am glad to be alongside Jedi again, after all this time."

"We're glad to have you with us, Master," Luke smiled.

K'Kruhk tilted his head back, so his snout pointed toward the wall and his eyes gazed up at the ceiling. "After all this time," he marveled, "It seems there are miracles in the universe after all."

Jacen crossed his arms over his chest and grinned. "Will the wonders never cease?"

PART III
DESTINIES

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The rock-face canyon wall was a shadowy blur as they passed, and cold wind rushed through the open starboard doors. It made K'Kruhk's long hair a tangled mess and turned Mara's into a crimson stream running from her head. She was clasping the overhead rails tight with both hands, her lightsaber at her hip and twin blaster pistols holstered beneath her arms. Jacen held onto the rail with one arm, while the other clutched the lightsaber at his belt as he leaned close to Tenel Ka.

As for the Queen Mother of Hapes, she had tied her red braids into an elaborate coil that knotted at the back of her head. She had borrowed a black flex-armor suit from Mara Jade's wardrobe, similar to the one the master herself wore, one with reinforced joints, an armored breastplate, and a utility belt to which she had hooked her rancor-tooth lightsaber. Like Jacen, she clung to the railing with only one hand, and like him, she couldn't take her attention off the canyon walls racing past, no matter how the wind dried her eyes and stung her pale cheeks.

"We're not going that fast," Jacen said. He had to lean close and spoke loudly in her ear to be heard over the roar of wind.

"I would hope not," Tenel Ka said. The canyon was narrow, the twilight was dim, and neither Ben nor

Master Skywalker had ever flown this ancient gunship before today.

"In truth, I am more concerned with our weapons," she said, a little more loudly so as to be heard.

"This ship doesn't have working guns," Jacen said.

"Exactly."

Mara shouted from behind, "If we can sneak in close, we won't need them."

Tenel Ka could feel Jacen tense in the Force. When they'd gone over the plan, it had been generally agreed that she and Jacen had the easy part. Master Skywalker was going to fly over the command sphere and drop them on the hull. From there, they would follow K'Kruhk's instructions and either carve, sneak, or fight their way to the command deck.

Master K'Kruhk and the Masters Skywalker had a much harder task. They were to pilot their gunship right into the command ship's open hangar bay, through a gauntlet of who-knew-how-many rehabilitated droid fighters, and make their way to the command sphere. Even a great and talented Jedi Knight like Jacen thought it was incredibly dangerous.

But, she supposed, that was what made them Masters.

Tenel Ka tried to push her worried for the older Jedi out of her mind. The fate of Allana, and maybe her and Jacen's lives, could be decided in the coming minutes and she could not allow herself to be distracted. Nor could she allow herself to doubt; Jacen had told her more than once that second-guessing and hesitation could lead to disaster. It was a lesson he had learned the worst way possible, and she thought deep down he still blamed himself for his brother's death.

To make things harder, pain continued to shoot out through her torso whenever she had to twist or shift to keep her balance. In a combat situation, she might even re-open her wound.

Now more than ever, she was infinitely glad that she would have Jacen by her side.

Because the gunship had no operating communications system, they got their approach notification through Ben Skywalker's shouted warning. She could barely hear it over the howling wind, but Jacen used the techniques he learned from the Theran Listeners to hear Ben clearly.

"Two minutes," Jacen said, loud and clear for everyone to hear.

"Are there signs that we've been detected?" asked K'Kruhk.

"Apparently not," Jacen said.

"Lucky us," Mara said under her breath.

After sixty years of abandonment on this desolate planet, Tenel Ka doubted the control ship could function at even a quarter of normal capacity. Most likely its external sensors were damaged. At least, she prayed so.

She glanced over her shoulder at Jacen. His eyes were closed and he had a look of deep concentration on his face. He might have been counting down the seconds until their arrival, or maybe searching the Force for whoever was one the control ship. Either way, she fought the urge to send him a warm touch through the Force.

There would be time for that later. She'd make sure of it.

"Thirty seconds!" Jacen snapped. "Get ready!"

Jacen grabbed the rails with both hands while K'Kruhk braced himself against the rear wall. There was a sudden jerk, and the gunship pulled into a steep upward climb. Tenel Ka had braced herself and adjusted her footing, but as her body strained to stay upright a sharp pain shot into her side and her grip on the rail momentarily loosened. The old metal burned against her palm and her boots slipped back on a deck now pitched upward

by more than ninety degrees. For a moment her heart froze and she stumbled back-

-right against Jacen. He softened her impact with the Force and he dropped one arm to grip her around the waist, holding her tight against his chest.

In any other situation, she would have savored their position. Now she watched the dark canyon walls whip past, then fall away. Black jagged mountains rose against a twilit sky. Then a massive block of metal filled their vision. It whipped past as fast as the canyon had, then disappeared, and the the gunship's nose dove forward again. Jacen pinned Tenel Ka against him as the deck shifted back to an even keel.

The gunship slipped between the massive antennae and transmission towers that rose from the aft section of the command ship. Most of them had been broken and burnt out decades ago, and when the ruin fell away the gunship was gliding smoothly and evenly along the spine connecting the circular outer section to the command sphere.

Behind her, K'Kruhk said, "Your husband is an impeccable pilot."

"I've heard it runs in the family," said Mara.

"Ready?" Jacen said in Tenel Ka's ear.

"Ready," she echoed.

The gunship pulled up slightly, but not enough to pitch them off-balance. The vessel pivoted slightly, turning its open starboard side to face the tall conning tower, reminiscent of a star destroyer's, that jutted up from the crown of the command sphere. Luke tilted the vessel's starboard wing, shifting the deck downward beneath their feet.

In this twilight, it was clear that the lights of the bridge were on.

"Now!" Jacen shouted.

They let go of the railing together. They pitched out of the gunship, arms around each other's waists, and reached out with the Force as one. She was suddenly submerged in Jacen's calm, controlled confidence, but she barely gave it conscious thought as the two of them slowed their fall as the exterior of the bridge rushed up to meet them.

They disengaged from each other just before they hit the deck. Tenel Ka slammed onto the hard cold surface like she'd always trained herself to handle hard impacts: balls of her feet, joints bent to absorb impact. The shock still shuddered through her body, and pain ricocheted through her abdomen. She pitched her body forward and rolled over one shoulder, then came up on both feet, aching but undamaged.

She felt dim pride that she hadn't gotten soft.

Behind her, Jacen rose to his feet. She watched over his head as the gunship banked down toward the command ship's remaining hangar wing. To her relief, no guns were firing, and no droid fighters had been launched. Their approach really had caught the enemy by surprise.

"Are you okay?" Jacen asked as he approached.

"I am fine, Jacen. Exhilarated, slightly."

"That's the spirit." He gave one of his father's grins and plucked his lightsaber off his belt. Its green blade lit up the twilight. "Ready?"

"Ready." Her hand felt the ivory smoothness of a rancor's tooth, and a silver glow stretched out toward the sky.

"Did they land? Are they okay?" His father asked.

"They're good, Dad," Ben craned his neck to see two tiny shafts of light, green and silver, dancing on the roof of the command bridge. Then the gunship dove downward and banked to the right.

He tried to reach out with the Force and bid his cousin good luck. He didn't know if it got through, but he doubted Jacen would need it anyway.

Right now, he was more worried about himself.

As they dove toward the ominously open mouth of the hangar, he checked the scanners. Still no signs of droid starfighters, but for all he knew they might be inside the hangar right now, getting ready to launch.

"Get ready, Ben," Luke called.

Ben pivoted toward the rear of the craft and shouted, "Get ready!" loud enough to make his throat sore.

He didn't know if they could hear him back there without Jacen's Thera listener techniques, but he could sense his mother's resolve strengthen in the Force.

He felt it from his dad too as they plunged inside the command ship.

He understood that, for all its massive size, the command ship had a simple design. The outer ring was made up of one massive engine section in the back; two semicircular arms, hollow and stuffed with droids, extended from either side. All the brains of the ship were in the command center. It was, overall, a simple design, which was probably why it had been durable enough to retain basic functions after sixty years of abandonment.

The old gunship flew through the massive hangar with room to spare. Pale lighting fixtures glowed from the gently curved ceiling. Dusty, rusted, insectoid Trade Federation droids were pressed against the outer walls, hanging from racks in the ceiling, and stacked on metal shelving. To Ben's shock and relief, none of them seemed to be moving.

Then his father shouted "Whoa!" and fired the retro-burn thrusters. Ben's stomach nearly jumped out of his throat as the gunship suddenly spun ninety degrees and

went skidding sidelong across the deck, throwing up a rain of sparks.

Standing ten meters ahead of them were over a dozen droids. Each one stood on four gently curved metal legs, and twin red eyes glared down from each of their disc-like bodies. With a start Ben recognized them as the same TIE-like droid starfighters that had shot them down, now strutting like animals on stilt-like legs.

Light flashed in the bottom of his vision. Then he saw his mother and K'Kruhk charging across the deck toward the droids, green and violet sabers blazing.

"Ben!" his father snapped, "Stay here!"

"Dad!" He cried. "Wait! I-"

Luke didn't even pause to listen. The forward bubble-shaped cockpit popped open and his father leaped out. In a blur, his green lightsaber had ignited and he was charging to catch up with Mara and K'Kruhk.

Ben felt helpless and pathetic, trapped her inside the cockpit. He fumbled with the overhead control panels until his viewport popped open too. Cold recycled air filled his lungs as he struggled to rise from his seat. His crutch was stuffed in one corner of the cockpit and his cast knocked against the torn leather of his seat cushion as he tried to stand atop it. He clung to the rim of the open cockpit with one hand and grabbed his lightsaber with the other, but he didn't ignite it.

He knew there was nothing he could do except watch.

The droids were already firing laser blasts down at his parents and K'Kruhk. Mara caught one massive blast with her lightsaber and deflected it back, catching the droid between the red eyes. It wavered on wobbling legs for a moment before tumbling into the one next to it and bringing it down.

Meanwhile, K'Kruhk's massive gray blur ducked beneath the legs of another droid. He spun quickly, cutting two of its legs clean through. He thrust one

clawed hand into the air, and the droid tumbled back as if punched. It fell right in front of another droid that nimble avoided the attack, but then K'Kruhk gave another gesture and the two leg-tips sheared off from the first droid jumped off the ground and speared the second through its main body. The second droid flashed, smoked, wavered on overlong legs, and final fell in a fiery mess.

Against the growing light of flames, Ben could see his father hurl high lightsaber into the air. Its green pinwheel seemed to cut right through one droid, reverse course, slice through another, then finally cut through a third on its way back to the Grand Master's casually waiting hand.

A moment after the lightsaber slapped into Luke's palm, all three droids exploded.

The hangar was now filled with smoke and flame. Ben saw the flash of laser-bolts, and the blur of green and blue blades, but saw no sense in it. It was only by touching the Force that he knew his parents were unharmed.

At some point, artificial sprinklers began raining cold, rust-smelling water from the ceiling. Ben ducked beneath the awning of the opened cockpit to stay dry. The fires died and black smoke took their place. The smoke gushed out toward the hangar mouth and Ben buried his face with his hands and arms. As the smoke began to clear he waved those arms all around him to disperse it. The artificial rain kept falling, and it left a bitter metallic scent in the air.

When Ben stood once more on his slippery leather seat, two arms hoisting his body over the lip of the cockpit, he looked out across the hangar and saw three lightsabers burning in the mist.

As the smoke furled away he saw all three of the looking back at him across the distance. He couldn't

make out their expressions, but his mother and father touched him as one in the Force.

Stay, they said. We'll be back for you.

Awed and humbled, all he could do was nod. They must have seen it, or felt his acceptance through the Force, because all three masters turned as one and charged deeper into the belly of the enemy ship, leaving Ben to stand behind and watch until they disappeared.

Paks Veem had always known, on an intellectual level, that gentle, just, peace-loving Luke Skywalker was also an unparalleled warrior, even if he was getting on in years. Yet somehow, he'd never really *believed* it until he saw it with his own three eyes.

All five of them were gathered together. They were not on the command deck, nor in the laboratory, but had instead gathered inside a secondary command station located deep within the command sphere. Veem hadn't known the room existed until Vidious ushered all of them down there like it was a bomb shelter, and after a fashion it probably was. The Nemoidians were not a race renowned for their bravery, and it was no surprise that they would have a fallback command station hidden away from the vulnerable bridge tower.

At the moment, standing around the room's central table and watching the recordings from the hangar holocameras, none of them could come up with anything to say.

The cameras were automatically tracking the Jedi as they plunged deeper into the command ship's interior. They had already taken out a half-dozen droid fighters with astonishing ease, and now the three of them were cutting their way through a platoon of mechanical footsoldiers like they were children's toys.

Dorcan's *Green-Eyed Lady*, their slave-circuit ride to freedom, was at the very end of the hangar, nestled close

to the command ship's long-dead reactor core. In theory, it was parked in the most secure spot on the ship, but as he watched the Jedi in action, Veem decided that nothing was safe.

As the Jedi finished off the last droids, Alsok cleared his throat and asked in a wavering voice, "Can we identify the three Jedi? I believe the human male is Luke Skywalker."

"Who cares what their *names* are?" Dorcan sounded genuinely afraid.

"The male is Luke Skywalker," Vidious said coolly. "The human female is his wife, Mara Jade Skywalker."

"Great. Somebody brought their Field Guide to Jedi Masters," Dorcan said. "Who's the big furry thing?"

Neither Vidious nor Dician had an answer to that. For some reason Veem was relieved to see them stumped, though neither looked as close to panic as the three mere mortals in the room.

"I thought you had a plan for these Jedi," Dorcan looked at the Sith accusingly. "They don't look under control to me."

"Patience," Vidious said calmly. He pulled back part of his black cloak to reveal a small control panel strapped to his wrist, not unlike Dorcan's own. With one eye, Veem saw the droid technician uncomfortably tug his jacket's sleeve down.

Nobody else seemed to notice. All other eyes were on Vidious as he tapped in some commands, then let his cloak fall back down again.

"And what was *that*?" Veem asked.

"Something they're not expecting," Vidious said. "They should run into it in about three minutes, given their current pace."

"Oh." Dorcan said, and nothing more.

"Oh?" Alsok raised a white brow. "What does that mean, *oh*?"

"That's what those things were for," Dorcan said dumbly.

Veem and Alsok stared, Vidious simply nodded.

Suddenly a red light started flashing on the table. Dician tapped the table's small control console, shrinking the holocam image from the hangar and bringing up a new one. Veem instantly recognized the setting as the broad one-level command deck.

Two human figures were standing in the middle of the room. One was a male with shaggy dark hair, the other a woman with red hair pulled up tight. One arm of her black jumpsuit seemed to be cropped just above the elbow. It took Veem a moment to notice the clean-cut circular holes in the main viewport.

"Five Jedi," Alsok said. *"Lovely."*

"That's the Hapan Queen," Dorcan stabbed a finger at the holo. *"The other guy-"*

"That's the one who pulled our recon fighter out of the air," said Dician.

Veem leaned in closer, like it would make the holo any less blurry. The one-armed woman was most definitely Tenel Ka. Even without the missing limb, that erect bearing, the alert tilt of the red-topped head, even something in the shape of her blurry face, matched exactly with the half-forgotten teenage girl he'd seen askance half a lifetime ago.

Now that he had a better look, there was something about the man too. He had grown physically in the past fifteen years, just like Tenel Ka, but his bearing and the shape of his face seemed shockingly familiar.

Jacen Solo, scion of royalty, savior of the galaxy, and childhood friend of the Queen of Hapes. It had to be.

And if Jacen Solo and Tenel Ka really were still traipsing around the galaxy together, well, that made him a very strong candidate for the father of an elusive Hapan princess.

Suddenly, Veem became *very* interested in acquiring genetic samples from the man on the bridge.

"They're dangerously close to the laboratory," Alsok said. "If they get to the Spaarti cylinders, everything we've done here is for nothing."

"The Spaarti tubes are being taken care of," Vidious said. "They will not get that far anyway."

"Quite," Dician's fingers danced over the console.

Veem watched on the security holo as both Jedi seemed to weaken at the knees. The Hapan Queen pitched forward to her knees and tried to hold herself upright with a single hand, while Solo fell backward so that he was pinned to the floor, facing the ceiling and struggling to even lift his arms.

"You adjusted the artificial gravity," Alsok said, impressed.

"Indeed," Dician nodded. "Unfortunately, that function is no longer operable in the main hangar, but it is quite effective here."

"Can you kill them?" Veem asked. "With enough force you must be able to crush their lungs."

"We could," Dician said, "But that Jedi male seems rather... interesting. At the very least, we're going to want a little DNA sample." She punched something else into the console.

Veem had to get his claws on that sample. Combined with the data-chip in his pocket, it created the kind of blackmail potential most criminals and con artists could never dream of.

Not for the first time, he wished these damned Sith were a little less secretive.

"What is it?" Veem asked. "What are you sending?"

"*Those* things," Dorcan said.

"What things? What are you talking about?"

"Be patient, Mr. Veem," Dician tapped a forefinger against her lips. "You'll find out in just a moment."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Mara heard them before she saw them, but it took her a critical second to recognize their clanking, jangling sound. She'd only heard them once before, and she didn't realize where right away.

As it was, she barely had time to whip up her lightsaber for defense when three droidekas rolled into view, unsnapped their circular bodies, and began firing a hail of green laser blasts at the Jedi.

"Destroyer droids!" K'Kruhk shouted as he batted two laser blasts right back into a droideka's spherical shields, where the energy flashed and dissipated harmlessly.

"We've fought them before!" Mara said. Their mission to the wreckage of Outbound Flight felt like a lifetime ago.

The droids strutted slowly toward them on three curved legs. Luke, K'Kruhk, and Mara kept batting their laser blasts back at them, but every time they had to take a step back.

"They're herding us," Luke warned.

Mara risked a look over her shoulder. The droidekas had not only stopped their advance into the hangar bay, but were now trying to shuffle them toward to entrance to some auxiliary storage chamber. If they became stuck in there, it would become all the easier for the enemy to pin them down indefinitely.

As she deflected yet another energy blast, Mara felt a spike of alarm in the Force. For a moment she thought it was Ben; then she realized Jacen was trying to call on her.

"I felt it too," Luke breathed. He was trying to stand his ground, but the droidekas were getting closer. None of them were as young as they'd once been, and they could only keep this up for so long.

Mara looked over her head and saw a long catwalk running overhead. She gave Luke and K'Kruhk a small nudge with the Force, then hurled her body upward. She tucked her knees against her chest and wheeled upward; the droidekas tried to track her at first, but their horizontal weapons sweep had a very limited range. When her hands grabbed hold of the railing her body unfolded and slammed against the side of the platform. Pain stabbed through her torso but she hung on tight, found one last pulse from the Force, and threw her whole body over the railing.

She crouched for a second, winded and pained, clutching her ribs and feeling for cracks. Luckily she found none.

She was getting too old for this. They all were.

She looked down and saw two droidekas concentrating on K'Kruhk, while the other fired at Luke. She leaned over the railing and threw her lightsaber down. It pinwheeled as it fell and she guided it onto the head of the droideka attacking her husband. As expected, the droideka had been focusing its shields forward to fend off deflected bolts. Mara's lightsaber sheared through its rear end, cutting off one leg and sending it falling onto its curved back. She pulled her lightsaber back up, and on its way to her hand it spun through what passed for the droideka's head.

Her lightsaber slapped back into her palm but she was already readying another throw. One of the droidekas

attacking K'Kruhk was now pivoting toward Luke, but Luke was moving fast. He executed a sharp shoulder roll that brought him up on the droideka's left side. His lightsabed blazed the whole way, cutting a smoking line through the bottom of the deck, then whipping up and scraping against the droideka's shields. Luke came up behind it and as it struggled turn on three ungainly legs, K'Kruhk deflected a blast from his own opponent into the back of the other droid. Luke's droideka sparked, whined, and toppled face-down on the deck.

Mara hurled her lightsaber down one more time, and it was over.

Luke and K'Kruhk switched their lightsabers off. Both old Jedi Masters were panting in exhaustion but their relief emanated through the Force.

"I hope," said K'Kruhk, "That there are not many more of those."

"We need to hurry!" Mara called down. "Jacen's in trouble!"

"I feel it too," Luke said.

As he and K'Kruhk began moving further into the curving hangar bay, Mara scanned the upper level catwalks for a possible shortcut.

Before K'Kruhk and her husband got far the hangar was filled with the groaning of an old door rolling open. From her high vantage point, Mara could see an opening door to one auxiliary room some hundred meters deeper into the hangar.

"Incoming!" she shouted down. She raced down the catwalk to the hangar's inner wall, where another walkway hugged the gently curving side.

Luke and K'Kruhk advanced, lightsabers ready. They moved for the cover of a massive old Baktoid droid troop carrier that lay derelict. Mara hurried along the walkway, then stopped suddenly when she got a look at the new arrivals.

There were six of them. They were of much thicker design than that spindly droids they had been fighting so far. They had wide shoulders, short neckless heads, long arms that ended in bristling laser cannons, and thick legs that pounded on the floor. Despite a clearly lethal design, their actual bodies seemed strangely patchwork. As they got closer, Mara realized that some kind of dark gray armor plating had been bolted onto their existing carapaces. The plating covered not only their torsos, but their arms and legs and the bumps of their heads.

"They've been modified!" she shouted down. "I don't like this!"

"They are B3 battle droids!" K'Kruhk called up. "They are formidable, but I have fought them before!"

"Their hulls are different! I think-"

Her voice was drowned out by the sound of laserfire. The droids not only fired at Luke and K'Kruhk, but also upward at Mara. She sprinted across the walkway and red blasts scored the metal behind her. She saw what she thought was a lift tube entrance, down on the bottom deck, but the droids were moving to cut her off.

Behind her, K'Kruhk bellowed, "Cortosis!"

One word was all she needed to hear. Even worse than Mandalorian *beskar'gam* armor, Cortosis was a bane of the Jedi. Not only did it block lightsabers, mere contact caused a lightsaber to short-circuit, rendering it inoperable unless repaired.

Still running along the catwalk, she looked down and saw K'Kruhk attempted to retreat. Luke's lightsaber was still on and he was deflecting bolts back at the droids, but even the shots that made contact only hissed impotently against the strapped-on cortosis armor.

K'Kruhk was a big target, and Mara's heart sank as a few bolts tore through his massive animal-fur cloak. Yet the Whiphid did not slow down; instead he ran to the base of the Baktoid droid carrier and threw himself

upward. Luke followed his lead and the two Jedi pressed themselves low against the carrier's roof. The Jedi were temporarily out of the cortosis droids' range, but they were already shifting positions for a better shot.

"Go!" Luke shouted, his voice suddenly clear now that no no laser blasts echoed through the hangar. "Help Jacen!"

She wanted to shout an objection, but she knew he was right. She leaped off the walkway, plunged, and called on the Force at the last minute to soften her landing on the hard deck. Pain still shot through her legs, and the moment her boots touched ground red laser-blasts began whipping past her head.

She brought her lightsaber up and began backing toward the lift tube, all the while facing the two droids advancing toward her. She could keep deflecting their bolts, but if they got close enough they could simply throw themselves on her lightsaber in order to short-circuit it, and after that she would be helpless.

Mara spared a second of concentration to reach out with the Force and nudge the lift's control panel, summoning it to her deck.

She really, really hoped it was still working.

She heard a metallic sound muffled by the wall behind her, and then she heard the hiss of doors sliding open. She leaped backward into the lift but kept her lightsaber up the whole time.

The doors slid shut before her, but a droid was charging fast. The massive thing managed to throw itself into the air like a missile. It scraped against the doors as they were closing and Mara snapped off her lightsaber, lest it hit cortosis and short-circuit. The droid found its broad shoulders wedged between the closing doors. Its arms flailed helplessly at its sides, trying to squeeze them forward, and Mara could swear she saw alarm in the red eye-like lights of its face.

With her free hand, she pulled out one of her blasters, placed the barrel into a spot between cortosis plates, and fired five shots into its head.

Its limbs kept flailing dumbly, but its head and shoulders were a smoking ruin. She summoned the Force to add extra strength to her legs and gave the droid a strong two-foot kick out of the tube.

Then, finally, the doors slid neatly shut, and she was carried upward toward the command deck and the unknown.

As the amplified artificial gravity crushed Jacen against the deck, pulling his limbs to the metal floor and pinning his vision on the ceiling and nearly squeezing the breath out of his lungs, he couldn't believe that after everything he'd done, he was about to die like *this*.

He'd escaped from the Shadow Academy at fourteen. He'd defeated the Yuuzhan Vong Warmaster in single combat. He'd slain the voxyn queen. He'd merged with the Force and turned Supreme Overlord Onimi's poisonous toxins against himself.

Hell, he'd even won over Tenel Ka.

Now he was about to be crushed to death by an unknown enemy after stumbling into a stupid trap he should have anticipated. Worse still, he'd dragged Tenel Ka into this; she was now pinned face-down onto the desk and had given up her vain struggle to push herself up with only one arm. A long time ago Jacen would it vaguely romantic to die alongside the woman he loved. Right now the thought of dying, and leaving Allana helpless against the Dark Man, filled him with such rage he could have torn the entire deck apart.

If he could have, he would, but he couldn't summon the Force. He was too panicked for that, and wracked by too much physical pain. The most he could manage was a spike of alarm through the Force, hopefully touching

his cousin or uncle or aunt, but he had no way of knowing if he got through. All he could do was wait.

Through his anger and pain, he realized that he wasn't dead yet, though he probably should have been. Whoever had trapped him here certainly had the means to kill him, just like they could have blown *Teneniel* and *Jade Shadow* up in orbit.

Whoever had him here wanted him alive. Jacen had given his enemies exactly what they wanted, and for all his anger, he couldn't muster the strength to do anything about it.

Something changed. The pressure roared in his ears, drowning out sound, but he felt vibration through the deck. It was thick, hard, like heavy footsteps. His vision was unfocused and he couldn't turn his head without fear of snapping his own neck, but as he stared at the pale blurry ceiling, he thought he saw some dark figure step over him. He saw no head, just broad shoulders and broad torso.

The thing leaned in closer. His eyes found focus, briefly, on the metal form of some kind of thick-bodied combat droid. It was hard to tell, but the droid's exterior seemed strangely discolored and patchwork.

He felt a pain, sharp and small, in his arm. A needle, he thought. The droid was sticking him with a needle. The droid was taking a blood sample to take back to its master, who had already claimed samples from Tenel Ka and Allana.

It was taking the samples to deliver them to Neev Alsok, the master geneticist, to put into a Spaarti tube so they could grow a clone of him, of Tenel Ka, of Allana.

He tried to scream, but no sound came out. He tried to use the Force to tug the lightsaber from his belt and decapitate the droid, but it wouldn't budge.

The shadow pulled away. The deck shook with receding footsteps until those, too, were gone.

They had what they'd drawn him here for all. All that was left was to amp up the artificial gravity just a little more and kill him.

He wanted to reach out to Tenel Ka one last time, to tell her he was sorry, not just for this, but for everything he had and hadn't done.

He couldn't even manage that.

Another vibration rippled through the deck. This one was not as strong. He waited for the pounding of more boots but they never came. Against the dull, all-engulfing roar in his ears, he thought he heard a faint sharp snapping sound. Again and again he heard it, but he didn't know what it was. He couldn't even guess.

Then, suddenly, the weight was gone.

He gasped. Breath drew into his lungs and filled them and he pushed air out again. He lifted one trembling hand over his face and waited for his eyes to find focus.

Finally, he turned his head.

Tenel Ka was on her knees, head bent against the metal floor as she struggled to rise. At her side: Aunt Mara, lightsaber blazing in one hand, lifting Tenel Ka with the other.

Jacen planted both palms against the deck and pushed himself up. He couldn't muster the strength to stand, but sitting on the floor he looked around to see the smoking mess Mara had carved the bridge into. Black curving lines, still smoking, danced around the floor. The control consoles were sparking wrecks. Even the lights were flickering now.

"Aunt Mara," he gasped, "Thank you. What did you—"

"Smashed stuff up until I killed the gravity," she said as Tenel Ka rose to her knees. "Are you okay, Your Majesty?"

"I am... mildly damaged," Tenel Ka said. She had been slammed face-first onto the deck and blood trailed her nose to her lips; her forehead had been cut and red welts

were forming on her face that would leave ugly bruises if untreated.

"Can you stand?" Jacen asked her, not quite ready to attempt it himself.

"I... believe so..." With Mara grabbing one shoulder, raised herself on one leg, then the other. When Mara carefully let her go she shifted and swayed but did not fall.

As Mara came over to offer Jacen a hand, he asked her, "Did you get the droid?"

"What droid?" she asked. From her tone it sounded like she already knew.

"Big battle droid. It came... took a blood sample."

He reached out and grabbed wrist. She clasped his hand and pulled him to his feet. For a second he felt like he was going to topple back over.

"Did it have patchwork skin?" asked Mara.

"Uh, yeah, I think so."

"That's a layer of cortosis ore," she said. "You know, the lightsaber-killer."

"Where is Master Skywalker?" asked Tenel Ka.

"He and K'Kruhk got pinned down in the hangar bay, fighting those things."

"We must help them!" said Tenel Ka. "We should-"

"We need to find that droid. And the Spaarti tubes," Jacen said. "Uncle Luke can take care of himself."

To his relief, Mara nodded. "Jacen's right. We have to stick to the primary mission. Let's go search the command sphere."

"What if they try the grav trick again?"

Mara held up her lightsaber. "Then we wreck the place."

Jacen nodded. Right now he wanted to tear this entire ship apart bolt-by-bolt. Doing it deck-by-deck would be good enough.

It was finally time to pay back some of the damage they'd been dealt, and he was looking forward to it.

Though his parents had passed beyond his range of vision, deep into the curving hangar bay of the control ship, Ben knew that something was very, very wrong.

The urgency and confusion in the Force only fueled the feelings inside of him. His parents- both of them- had ordered him to stay in the cockpit of the gunship. He was young, he was half-crippled, and he'd be more of a burden than a help if he'd gone with them. That wasn't just what his father had intimated, it was certifiable fact.

It was also a fact that he couldn't just sit back here and do nothing while his family could be hurt, even killed. His father had warned him in no uncertain terms that people might be killed, and that Ben more than any others needed to survive because he was the youngest and had the biggest future ahead of him.

Ben that thought was *poodoo*. He'd have no future if he lost his parents on Kal'shikar, so instead of doing nothing like a good boy, he dropped into the cockpit and began fumbling with the controls.

He struggled to remember the lesson his father had given him just hours before. He found the switch that closed the transparisteel bubble, which was probably a good place to start, and flipped it. The servos groaned as the heavy seal settled over the cockpit until it closed with a heavy clanking sound.

After that he searched for the engines. He found a couple red switches, flipped them, and got nothing. Maybe those were weapons. He found another set of switches, orange this time, and began trying those. Just as he was considering this might not have been the best way to fly a ship, the entire hull starting rattling with the firing of thrust engines.

"Okay," he breathed, "Not bad."

The gunship's repulsorslifts had never worked to begin with, so instead of trying to levitate the ship for a soft launch, he gripped the twin control sticks in front of him and tried to push the ship upward. He fit his good foot onto the trust pedal beneath the console and pressed on it, lightly.

The gunship jerked into the air. Ben was thrown back into his seat and he tugged the stick back with him, launching the ship into an even steeper climb. The hangar ceiling was suddenly jumping to meet him.

He started swearing incoherent profanities as he wrested with the stick. He pushed it forward and the gunship jumped down again. He relaxed pressure on the thrusters, then eased the stick back once more.

Slowly, one awkward jerk after another, he began to get control over his ship. After wobbling past the wrecked droid starfighters, he nearly smashed into the top, bottom, or sides for the hangar a half-dozen times before he got the ship steady and level.

When he did, he finally risked kicking the engines up a notch.

He was thrown back in his seat once more by the acceleration, but this time he kept the stick steady. The gunship began to cruise deeper into the hangar, and he tugged the stick gently to the right to keep pace with the ship's slow curving.

It didn't take him long to find his dad.

The back end of the hangar was filled with smoke and debris and the fall of artificial rain. Red lasers flashed through the air and he thought he saw the green blur of his father's saber from the top of a big brown hump-backed droid carrier. His dad was crouched low as the droids fired up at him, and right next to him was K'Kruhk's shaggy gray bulk.

He couldn't see his mother at all.

He shoved down his panic- he'd *know* if she was hurt- and cut energy from the thrusters. As the gunship veered toward the droid carrier he could see his father turn to see his approach. The droids stopped to pivot also, and a second later they all raised their arms and began shooting.

Closing the cockpit had been a very good idea. Red energy splattered and hissed and scarred streaks across the transparisteel bubble. Ben winced as the light blinded him. He knew he was going to crash and he cut the engine power entirely. His stomach leaped up toward his heart as he dropped. He threw his hands over his face.

What happened after that, he wasn't sure. His entire body got knocked around the cockpit; elbows, knees, ribs, everything except his well covered head and cast-encased leg seemed to take hits. When he opened his eyes everything was a smoky blur. He fumbled with the control panel, found the switch to open the cockpit bubble, and flicked it. Nothing happened.

He listened for the sounds of laserfire but heard nothing. He grabbed his lightsaber, but hesitated before trying to cut his way out.

Then he remembered the short ladder leading down to the cargo bay. He awkwardly tried to pull his cast-encased leg out from beneath the console, but somehow it had gotten stuck. He swore and tried to move it again, but it was wedged tight between something.

Then, with a harsh groaning noise, the bubble began to open. At first Ben thought there might have been some damage-induced time delay between his command and the action. Then he saw his father standing before him on the gunship's nose, arms crossed over his chest.

Ben stared at his father. Luke stared back.

"Um," he said, "I stayed in the ship, just like you said."

Before Luke could reproach him, the gunship shifted portside under some additional weight. When it didn't tip, Ben carefully pivoted around to see K'Kruhk standing on the gunship's back.

"Well done, padawan," the old Whiphid said. "You've crushed them all! Your timing was excellent."

Ben looked at his surroundings. He'd managed to fly the gunship right into a wall, but he seemed to have collided with the bulkhead right as the ship was skidding to a halt anyway. The droid carrier the two Masters had been perched on was over his left shoulder. The mangled metal corpses of some thick-bodied combat droids were scattered around the gunship's blackened base.

Ben took one long, sweet moment to feel proud of himself. Then he said, "What's that sound?"

He seemed to have heard it before Luke or K'Kruhk, but from their expressions they were also noticing it. It sounded like a high-pitched wobbling sound, oddly muffled. Kind of like the sound you got from old, malfunctioning repulsorlifts. This sound seemed to be coming from all sides of the hangar.

He saw the first two slip out from behind a battered disc-shaped Corellian freighter. They floated in the air on broad semi-circular brown metal aprons, while their upper bodies were topped with long pivoting laser cannons. Ben looked toward the mouth of the hangar and saw two more approaching. Balanced on the apron of each craft were two battle droids just like the ones he'd mowed down: broad shoulders and thick bodies, all covered in mottled armor plating.

"Tanks," Ben said. "Great."

Apparently his timing wasn't very good after all.

Overall, things were not going to plan. They weren't in the critical emergency stage yet, but they were certainly

not going to plan. Even the calm, confident masks Dician and Vidious always wore noticeably slipped as the ancient LAAT/i gunship skid madly across the hangar deck and ran down a whole squadron of cortosis-skinned battle droids like an out-of-control speeder truck.

At least they'd collected Jacen Solo's DNA sample. Paks Veem just needed to get his hands on it.

They'd been watching the fight in the main hangar long enough. Veem asked, "What happened to the others? Where are they?"

"Just a moment," Dician said, and she tapped the table's console. The image of battle tanks surrounding the crashed gunship minimized and was replaced with a cycling feed from a number of security cameras inside the command sphere.

One image after another flicked by. More than a few showed empty rooms and corridors that had been savagely torn apart. Black tears had been slashed across floor-panels and walls.

"Tried the grav trap again?" Dorcan asked.

"Unfortunately, Jedi are quick learners," Vidious said. "Most traps only work the first time."

"That why you're sending more cortosis droids against Skywalker and the Whiphid?" Veems asked, then immediately regretted his sarcasm.

The Sith didn't seem phased. Dician suddenly stopped cycling through cameras when the holo showed a long corridor, so far undamaged. Three figures were walking from an entrance on the far end toward the camera emplacement.

"Where are they?" Alsok asked.

"Deck A7, Section 12," Dician said.

"Ah, not good," Veem said. "That's close to the lab. They're going to find all the Spaarti tubes."

Calmly, Vidous said, "Some of the specimens have already been moved."

"What?" Veem, Dorcan, and Alsok bleated in unison.

Dician brought up the feed from the laboratory. Of the twelve Spaarti tubes Veem had last seen in there, only four still had beings floating inside. The others had all been emptied, not only of clones, but of the enriching fluid that had once filled them.

"What did you *do*?" Alsok stared at the Sith. "Removing clones from the tubes before they are fully mature can be—"

Vidious held up a hand. "We are keeping them safe."

"You should have consulted me beforehand!" Alsok snapped. "I'm your chief scientist!"

"You're the chief geneticist," Dician said. "I am still the overseer on the cloning project and I commissioned droids to move the clones when it looked like the Jedi weren't going to do down easily."

"You should have known that in the first place," Veem said. "They're *Jedi*, and you're—"

He snapped his mouth shut before he could say any more. Alsok and the Sith were staring at him, expectant, but Dorcan's expression had a decidedly *shut up now!* bent to it.

Dician faced Alsok. "As the chief geneticist, however, I believe you should go to the laboratory now to make sure all the secure data is erased. Destroy the computer if you have to. Also, the droid with the male Jedi's blood sample is on its way to the lab. We need that DNA sample secured."

"Me?" Alsok paled. "The Jedi are on their way now!"

"Don't worry, we'll send a half squad of battle droids to accompany you."

"You've sent a lot *more* against them so far and it's barely slowed them down!"

"I'll go with you too," Veem said.

"You?" Alsok gogged. "When did you go crazy?"

If they hurried to the lab and got the blood sample they could make a break for it, which should have been obvious, but apparently the Omwati didn't have his head in the game.

"I'll go too," Dorcan said. "More the merrier."

That seemed to slap sense into him. Alsok, suddenly determined, nodded, "All right. We'll go together."

"You had better hurry," Vidious said dryly. "You likely have only fifteen minutes before the Jedi arrive at the laboratory."

"Then we'd better run." Veem grabbed Dorcan and Alsok by the shoulders. "Come *on!*"

And, to Veem's slightly giddy amazement, they walked out of the chamber with no Sith looming behind them. A half-dozen bulky cortosis-covered battle droids, sure, but with no evil Force-users in sight, Veem felt better already.

At a fast pace, it would take them eight or nine minutes to get to the lab, which meant they had to hurry. As they walked down the corridor to the lift shaft, trailing by a long line of clanking droids, Veem tapped the inside of his wrist so Dorcan could see. The man nodded, pulled up his sleeve, and punched something into the panel on his wrist.

"Can we speak freely now?" wheezed Alsok. The fast pace was taking a little breath out of the scientist and Veem hoped he didn't slow them down. They couldn't afford it.

"We're good," Dorcan nodded. "What's the plan?"

"We get the blood sample and we *run*."

"We can run now, too," Alsok said.

"You don't want to clean up your lab?"

"I backed up all my data before the Jedi arrived. If they get the original files on the computer, good for them. I've had it with this job."

"But you don't have Jacen Solo's blood sample."

"Is he the one with the queen?" Dorcan asked.

"He is, and I want his blood," Veem said with finality.

He wasn't going to tell that that he suspected Solo was the father of Tenel Ka's child- he had no proof yet, and he didn't trust either of them enough to tell them even if he'd been sure.

"What about our getaway vehicle?" Alsok asked.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, Mr. Dorcan, but isn't your ship currently right next to the major firefight with some Jedi?"

"I'd noticed that," Dorcan fought a scowl. "I was hoping we could grab the *Lady* when everybody's distracted."

"That's a risk. If they see you powering up your ship, our bosses call one of the tanks and blow it to bits. Before *or* after we get on board."

"There's always a backup plan," Veem said. "We've still got that crappy freighter we stole from Coruscant. It's not *Lady*, or my old ship, but it'll fly. I parked it closer to the hangar mouth, in one of the side sections, so it's not in the middle of a firefight."

"Are you sure it didn't get smashed when the Jedi came in?" Dorcan asked.

"I kept an eye on the security cams. She didn't get hit."

When they got into the lift, they managed to cram in all three sentients plus three battle droids. The remaining ones stay on the lower level, apparently with the intent of riding up on the lift once it came for them. Sure enough, when they got off at the proper deck, one of the battle droids sent the lift back down to fetch its comrades.

Machines could be scary sometimes.

When they arrived through the laboratory's rear door, the room seemed strangely hollow with most of the

Spaarti tubes emptied. The only ones that remained were the Mon Cal, a Bith female, a dark-haired human female one, and a light-haired human male.

"Looks like they took Mr. Tattoo with them" Dorcan commented.

"How long can those clones survive outside their tubes?" Veem asked Alsok.

The Omwati was bent over the computer. "It depends. If put in cryo, they can last for close to a year without major damage."

"Do they have stasis tubes?"

Alsok gave an irritated shrug and kept scouring the computer. He said, "I was right, I've got everything backed up."

The lab's front door swung open. Veem and Dorcan drew their blasters but instead of angry Jedi they met a single cortosis battle droid. Its left arm was tipped not with a blaster cannon, but a slim translucent vial of red blood.

"Wonderful, got the package," Veem went up the droid and, barely wondering if it might blow a hole in him, pulled the vial off its arm.

He stared at the little thing in his palm. Combined with the data-chip in his pocket, he had everything he needed to commit the mother of all blackmails.

All he had to do now was get off this ship alive.

Then the other three droids arrived through the back entrance, and he suddenly felt surrounded by enemies.

"Here." He handed the vial to Alsok. "Scan the data into the computer. Fast."

The Omwati hesitated, but only for a second. The scientist could be thick sometimes but he wasn't stupid. He plugged the vial into the data-reader. Veem slipped the datachip out of his pocket and, as casually as possible under the prying red eyes of seven deadly battle droids, handed it off to Alsok. He leaned over the

Omwati's screen, just to make sure he really was copying the initial sampling data. Alsok handed him back the chip, then unplugged the blood vial and stuck it in his pocket with those of Tenel Ka and her child.

The whole dance had taken some thirty seconds. Dorcan watched all the while, not saying a thing. He'd probably figured Veem's plan out without being told. The only issue was what kind of a cut he'd want, but they could hack that out if they survived.

"Are we good?" he asked Alsok. The Omwati nodded. "Then we should make sure the Jedi don't get it."

Veem pocketed the data-chip and hefted his blaster. Alsok backed away with both hands held up and said, "I'm done. Do it."

Dorcan joined in too. A half-dozen laser blasts from each gun turned Alsok's computer- probably one of the most sophisticated pieces of genetic analytical equipment in the galaxy- into a hulk of slag.

All the while, those damned cortosis droids watched and didn't budge an inch.

"Okay, we're good." Veem looked back and forth between Alsok and Dorcan. "Is it time?"

"Let's get closer to the lift," Dorcan's voice had an uncharacteristically nervous edge. "We've only got one shot at this."

"Shutdown's risky," said Veem. "It'll definitely alert the Sith."

"I know, but it's ready if we need it."

"Okay." Veem gestured to the back door. "Let's get out of here."

He only made one step before he heard the sound of the front doors opening. He turned, knowing and dreading what he'd see.

Three Jedi walked in with lightsabers on and lifted high. In the front was a tall, middle-aged red-haired woman. Mara Jade Skywalker. Over her right shoulder,

the Queen of Hapes. Tenel Ka. And over her left, a dark-haired man whose eyes blazed with intent. Jacen Solo.

All here to make an end of it.

His eyes locked on Solo's, and for the tiniest of moment he remembered the messy-haired, goofy, outgoing kid he'd watched from a distance on Yavin 4. He could have never imagined their paths would cross like this, half a lifetime later, and for the tiniest second he felt the stir of regret for what he planned to do to both Jacen Solo and Tenel Ka. Unlike most of the beings he'd cheated, conned, or otherwise harmed over the years, they hadn't done anything in his knowledge to deserve it.

Dorcan called, "Hey, Your Majesty, never thought I'd see you again!"

Then all seven battle droids raised their guns as one and opened fire.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Too many things happened at once.

The droids raised their weapons to fire. Three sentients- an Omwati, a Gran, and the human she'd met on Krizlar Station- ducked and scampered for the rear exit. The air filled with red plasma bursts. The Spaarti tubes, all lined up in the middle of the room, began to shatter.

It was all Tenel Ka could do to step up alongside Mara and Jacen and begin deflecting laser blasts with her lightsaber. She tried to deflect blasts away from the Spaarti tubes when the Spaarti tubes began to break but with so much plasma flying through the air it took almost all of her concentration to keep from being hit.

In the chaos, she noticed the heap of blackened slag that had once been some kind of computer. Then she saw two of the cortosis droids with their backs angled away from the Jedi, spraying blasts at the row of Spaarti tubes, destroying one after another.

Whoever was threatening her family was going to great lengths to keep their secrets hidden.

"They're getting away!" Jacen shouted, and Tenel Ka noticed the human, Gran, and Omwati running for the back door.

"We have to get past the droids!" said Mara.

One last blast winged Jacen, singing his upper arm. He swore, then said, "Hold on, I'm going to try something!"

Before Tenel Ka could object, Jacen shut off his lightsaber and threw himself into the air. He tucked his legs against his chest and rolled into the middle of the battle droids' line. Two of them spun to fire down at him and he immediately grabbed both their wrists. Tenel Ka could feel a surge of Force energy as he pulled the droid's arms and pointed them at each other's faces.

The short-range laser blasts blew smoking holes in both droids. Jacen gave them strong pushes with the Force to topple them. One fell into another droid, knocking it off-balance. Mara lunged forward and artfully thrust the tip of her lightsaber between a gap in the droid's cortosis plating.

Three down, but four to go.

One droid threw itself toward Mara, hoping to short-circuit her lightsaber. She shut off her blade just in time, the rolled onto her back and delivered a strong two-foot kick against one of the droid's legs, knocking it off-balance. Tenel Ka lunged forward with her saber still blazing and cut off one arm at the unprotected elbow. The droid pivoted to swing its other arm at her like a club, but Mara had drawn both of her blaster pistols and was firing upward, right into the droid's crotch.

Jacen, meanwhile, had carefully sliced the legs out from another droid. It flailed on the ground, still firing off deadly lasers, while another droid charged Jacen, blasters blazing. Jacen deflected one blast, then another, then a third, right back into his attacker's cortosis-plated body. When it got too close he shut off his lightsaber-

-and the droid swung one arm horizontally, taking Jacen directly in the chest. Tenel Ka shouted his name as he was thrown across the room. His body smacked into the wall and slumped amidst the shattered

transparisteel and nutrient fluid that was spilling across the floor.

Mara put two blasts into the back of the legless droid's head, then turned her fire on the one that was marching on Jacen. Her shots hit an unprotected spot on the back of its shoulders, blowing out its blunt head and dropping it to the ground.

One more to go.

The droid was backing toward the same rear exit through which the enemy agents had already fled. It was firing from both hands and Mara and Tenel Ka were both forced to flick their lightsaber up and deflect the blasts. They slowly edged closer, backing the droid against the wall, but they knew there would be no easy way to take the droid from the front and end this fight.

Then a voice shouted in her mind: *Get down!*

Tenel Ka and Mara ducked in unison. A spray of transparisteel shards shot over their heads like a dozen flying knives. Every one of them landed on the battle droid. The force of impact slammed it hard against the wall, and on large shard caught its right elbow and nearly sheared off the arm entirely. As the droid struggled to fire with its remaining arm, Jacen said *Stay down!*

A second spray followed the first. One shard took off the droid's left arm, another tore off one leg. The killing machine finally fell to the deck with an anticlimactic *clank*.

Tenel Ka jumped to her feet and slipped across the wet floor to where Jacen was.

Still slumped with his legs out and back against the wall, he gave Tenel Ka a weary smile. "Don't worry, I'm fine."

She touched his torso. "Did you damage any ribs?"

Jacen winced slightly. "I'm okay, really. Nothing's broken, I think. Help me up."

Tenel Ka let Jacen grab one hand and raised him to his feet. Behind them, Mara Jade was examining the room's wreckage. Sprawled amidst the broken battle droids, shattered Spaarti tubes, and slick nutrient liquid were four humanoid bodies.

Tenel Ka had barely noticed them during the chaotic firefight. Now, standing amidst the corpses of nearly-mature clones, she felt a horrible sickness in her gut. Closest to her was a crumpled, laser-scarred Mon Calamari body.

"Cilghal," Jacen rasped. "They were cloning Cilghal. And..."

"That one's Kirana Ti," Mara pointed to the body of a dark-haired woman.

It was, indeed, the Dathomiri woman who had been one of Luke Skywalker's first Jedi disciples and, for a time, one of Tenel Ka's teachers at the Academy. Yet she looked strangely young, younger than Tenel Ka herself. Next to that body was another human's, this one male and also strangely familiar.

"I think that's Streen," Mara bent close to examine the pale-haired body, far younger than the Streen they knew.

Tenel Ka looked at the fourth body and her heart sank. The last clone had been a female Bith. Her long pale body was curled into a fetal position and her massive head had been cracked by laser blasts, but her face was still recognizable as belonging to Ulaha Kore.

Ulaha Kore had died on the fateful mission to Myrkr. She had been the first loss on a mission that had later claimed many more young Jedi, including Anakin Solo and, in a sense, Jacen as well. Somehow, Ulaha's DNA must have been collected over ten years previously. Tenel Ka couldn't help but feel angry at the sight of the body. It seemed like a mockery of the young Jedi's brave sacrifice.

"They're cloning Jedi," Jacen said. The anger in his voice was nothing compared to the burning she felt from him in the Force. "All of them, Jedi."

Tenel Ka realized that her assumptions had been wrong all this time. This was not an issue of Hapan court intrigue. The people who kidnapped Prince Isolder probably didn't even care who Allana's father was. Neither she nor her family were the enemy's real targets. The Jedi Order was.

She didn't know whether to feel relieved or horrified.

"They're getting away," Mara said. "We have to go. *Now*."

"Good." Jacen unhooked his lightsaber. "I have some questions for them."

Once all three of them threw themselves into the lift tube and began the controlled plunge down toward the hangar level, a panting, sweaty Dorcan grinned, "That actually kinda worked out, didn't it?"

"Are you *insane*?" gasped Alsok. The Omwati, clearly never one for exercise, looked like he would keel over any second.

"Hey, we made our getaway while the Jedi and droids were fighting it out. Maybe our bosses didn't even notice."

"I doubt that," Veem said, "They'll probably realize any second that we're not heading back to the command room."

"Let 'em send more droids," said Dorcan, "I still have the override switch."

"At least the Jedi are behind us," Alsok looked at the lift's ceiling.

"Don't forget the Jedi in front of us. And the tanks, and whatever else is going on in the hangar right now." Veem said.

"Thanks, I almost forgot." Dorcan pulled back his sleeve. "I'm going to warm up *Lady's* engines."

"Won't that tip the Sith off?" asked Veem.

"You do whatever you want with *your* ship," Dorcan said, and punched the activation code into his wrist-panel.

Everything went quiet except for the murmur of the moving lift. Veem and Alsok stared at the human, waiting for something more.

"It's working," Dorcan waved a hand. "Don't worry. It's working. We should be there in five minutes, outta this place in six."

Then Veem heard something. It was a sound he knew instantly but hadn't heard in a very long time and hadn't wanted to hear again.

Snap-hiss-hum.

And again, and again.

Three lightsabers, come to life.

"Get down!" he shouted and pulled his blaster just as a silver blade began to cut through the lift's ceiling. Dorcan threw himself against the door began firing up through the newly-cut hole with one hand while his other fumbled for the lift control panel. Alsok got there first. The capsule shuddered to an emergency halt and the doors slid open.

They had no idea what deck they'd landed on but they threw themselves into the waiting corridor in union. A long dark hallway stretched far beyond, lit sporadically by pools of pale emergency lighting, until it hit a dead-end branching point. They all started running, Alsok in the lead, Veem and Dorcan hanging back slightly to fire blindly over their shoulders. Veem knew he stood no chance of taking out a Jedi but he could at least slow them down a little.

"Where do we go?" Dorcan asked.

"I don't even know where we *are*!" Veem shouted.

The branching point was coming up fast. Veem kept firing over his shoulder until a laser blast whipped past his right eyestalk. Deflected back or shot from one of the Jedi, he couldn't tell and didn't care to know. He let his gun fall to his side and hurried.

As they reached the end of the hall, Alsok broke right. Dorcan broke right. Veem was about to break right when a volley of last blasts- definitely from somebody's gun- winged his right shoulder. He cried and jumped to the left clutching his wound. He threw himself down the left branch and tried to fire a few more shots back toward the lift, like it would do any good.

Dorcan and Alsok were running down the right branch as fast as they could. They didn't slow or look back.

Veem swore and kept going down the left branch. For all he knew, it would lead him right to the hangar where his ship was, while Dorcan and Alsok's path would put them right in the garbage smasher like they deserved.

Of course, he knew he'd never be that lucky.

He rounded one corner, then another. Feet clapped on the corridor behind him but he didn't dare look back or even shoot over his shoulder. Then he rounded a third corner and found himself face-to-face with the doors to another lift tube.

No, not lucky at all.

He swore and slapped the button to call the lift. Footsteps got closer and his mind raced. He didn't want the Jedi to get the drop on him again. He could try riding the lift up a few levels, then doubling back down, but that would get him just as lost as before.

The Jedi was almost on him. He could whip up his blaster and die with guns blazing and make a pointless ending to a pointless life.

Or, he could throw up his hands and plead for mercy.

The Jedi rounded the corner, skid to a halt. A lightsaber hung to one side, unignited. In the dim

backup lighting of the corridor he could only make out the shape of the body, and mere shape was enough.

Jacen Solo took a step closer, into a pool over overhead lighting. Light gleamed on his shaggy dark hair and long shadows down from his face like water.

Solo's hand twitched. His thumb shifted to the lightsaber's ignition button, but he didn't press. Veem froze with his blaster at his side. Neither moved.

He could feel Jacen Solo stretching out with the Force, tentatively touching his mind. He'd never touched thoughts with Solo before, hadn't touched thoughts with any Force-user except for Dician since, well, since he left the Academy. Everyone had always been better at it than him and it had made him feel inferior, weak, pathetic.

Maybe that was why he'd ended up in a life of crime. The only beings he could feel superior to were criminal low-lives. Yes, that made a lot of sense. Too much sense. Great to be figuring it out now, at the end.

He didn't want to die, not yet. He let his blaster clatter to the floor and raised both hands.

"I surrender," he said.

Jacen Solo didn't move. He could feel the Jedi pressing deeper into his mind. He knew, with the shock of fear, that if Jacen Solo wanted to tear apart his thoughts there was be nothing Veem could do to stop him. He tried to raise pathetic walls within his mind to block off the inquiry but Solo tore them down. He was digging deeper and deeper, bringing to surface so many thoughts-

"Wait," Veem gasped, "Please, no. I'll tell you everything! Everything!"

He staggered back against the doors to a lift that would never come. Memories and emotions long since buried surged through him. He felt like laughing and crying at all once.

"Solo, wait!" he cried. "You know me! I'm- we- at the Academy- we-"

He remembered.

He wanders through the smoking, blackened ruin of the Great Temple. He marvels at massive stones and trembles at the kind of power that could ruin something to ancient and immortal. He tries to push the memory of the day's events out of his mind but he cannot. He remembers TIE fighters screaming over the jungle, smoke, explosions, fire, death.

He remembers cowering under his bunk in the Blueleaf Temple while Master Dorsk and all the other apprentices rushed out to defend their home.

He's always known he was never Jedi material. He's never liked the other kids, all serious and righteous and determined to save the galaxy by themselves. He's never wanted to save the galaxy. He's never wanted to commune with the all-encompassing nature of the universe or whatever either.

Standing in the awful rubble he isn't sure what he wants at all.

Some kids talk like they've felt that sense of one-ness, but that might just be kids talking. He just likes it when the Force does things for him. He likes the impressed and humbled looks on people's faces when he does a trick. And like a stupid kid, he thought that if he came here he could learn better tricks. That was all.

He certainly didn't sign up for dying.

His knees go weak and he crouches in the rubble. Trails of tears start to run down from all three eyes and he feels ashamed for crying but he can't stop. He just wants to be far, far away from here.

He hears footsteps and jumps to his feet. He sees a human boy with messy brown hair staring at him. He's seen the kid before, usually hanging around his sister or the Wookiee or that girl red-haired girl who dresses like

a lizard. Didn't he cut off her arm? There's no doubt, though, this is Jacen Solo, nephew to the Grand Master and all-around Jedi prince.

"Are you okay?" Solo asks him.

For a second he can't believe Solo is actually talking to him. Veem blinks all three eyes dry and says, "Yeah, I'm fine."

Solo doesn't believe him. He says, "It was scary today, I know. I was scared too."

Veem can't believe a Jedi prince is ever scared, but he nods anyway.

"There's nothing wrong with being scared," Solo says, and a weird, playful smile comes on his face. "In fact, right now I feel more like a real Jedi than I ever have before."

Veem stares up at that Jedi prince, battered but relieved and strangely confident, and he knows he will never be like that.

He knows there's no place for him here- has known for a while- but now he knows he has to get far, far away from here, as far as he can possibly go.

He resolves then and there to flee.

Jacen remembered it. Somehow, in the meeting of their minds, they had brought back thoughts buried for half a life.

Jacen could have marveled at the miracle of chance that had brought him face-to-face with Paks Veem after so long, but he didn't. He needed to understand what had been happening on Kal'shikar, so he left Yavin 4 behind and dug deeper into the Gran's mind.

-he sprints across the Mynock's Roost to the balcony, firing madly behind him-

-he marvels at the sight of dozens of little droid starfighters gushing out of the control ship's hangar bays after sixty years of sleep-

-he works his jaw in wonder after the woman on the other end of the transmission names the price she is willing to pay for his services-

-he and the Omwati and the human scramble madly into the lift, desperate to get away from the Jedi, the droids, their masters, everyone-

-he recoils with dread as the woman with the pale tattoos touches his mind with the Force-

-he looks between the woman and her companion (horns, red and black) but he can't bring himself to put into words what he knows they must be-

Jacen gasped. His whole body shook but he couldn't pull himself out of Veem's thoughts, didn't even want to, because he knew deep in his bones that Paks Veem, unscrupulous and greedy and pathetic, was unwittingly serving a greater master than he could ever imagine.

Some trail, not memories but the ethereal stream of the Force, led his mind from Veem to the woman with the pale tattoos to the man who stood behind her, the Dark Man with the Yuuzhan Vong armor and tattooed chin who sat upon a dark throne and favored Allana with a twisted fatherly smile.

He'd sought that man for so long, alternatively believing and doubting in his very existence. Now it came to him, in a dizzying rush, the absolute knowledge that the Dark Man was not just real but actively working to tear down everything he had known-

-he throws up his red lightsaber and fends off one blow, then another, as a man in spiked Yuuzhan Vong armor, face hidden behind a horrible animal mask, attacks with animal ferocity; a green lightsaber blazes in either hand and each blow knock him back another step across a jagged terrain of dry blackened lava while black smoke gushes through the sky overhead a despair comes over him as he knows this is a fight he can never win-

-and then it was gone and he was panting and sweating and struggling to keep from falling against the wall.

He didn't know where that vision had come from. He'd never had it before. None of it- the colors of their lightsabers, the field of volcanic rock- made sense, but the Force had spoke to him again, and he knew with certainty that pitiful Paks Veem was an agent for the Dark Man.

It struck him that the Allana from his vision in the Pool of Knowledge may not have been Allana at all, but a clone brewed in a Spaarti tube and delivered to the Dark Man as some prepared Force-powered acolyte. Maybe *that* was the point of the cloning program, to create a legion of dark side users to destroy the Jedi order and bring ruin on the galaxy.

But clones Spaarti cylinders were notoriously prone to madness. Long-dead Joruu C'Baath had been proof of that. Those tubes had been destroyed too, intentionally, by the same battle droids who had been tasked with killing Jedi. They droids' masters had surely been trying to hide some secrets.

Something was going on here, something neither Jacen nor Veem could understand. The cloning project had been wrecked for today, yes, but the Dark Man still lurked, plotting ruin and corruption and harm to Allana and he had to be stopped.

There was no time to waste on Paks Veem. He could be hauled back to Alliance Intelligence and interrogated in detail, not that he could tell them anything useful. Then he would rot in jail for a very long time, which was all the Gran deserved.

As Jacen began to pull out of Veem's mind he snagged one more thought:

-he places the data-card into his pocket, the card that contains all the genetic information from Tenel Ka's

blood sample, and Allana's, and Jacen's own, and he thinks that now he has blackmail material to make him for life-

And suddenly Jacen was himself again, standing in a dark hallway, staring at the Paks Veem as he struggled to hold himself upright against the doors to a broken-down lift tube.

Veem blinked all three eyes and said weakly, "I give up, okay? Please... no more... no more..."

"Give me the data-card," Jacen said.

Veem blinked again.

"Give it to me!" Jacen shouted. He took two steps forward and Veem flinched. His lightsaber was suddenly blazing in his hand, though he hadn't even meant to turn it on.

"Okay, okay..." Veem didn't even bother to deny it. "Won't do... good in prison anyway..."

He fished inside his jacket with one hand, then tossed a slim data-card. Jacen caught it in his free hand. He held it tightly between thumb and forefinger and the sensation echoed Veem's own as he'd stroked that little chip and congratulated himself on his big score.

Jacen had the proof, but Paks Veem still knew. He couldn't share the information but he could still talk about it in prison and somehow, some way, that information could find its way to people who would harm Tenel Ka and Allana, be they greedy Hapan nobles or the Dark Man himself.

Assuming the Dark Man didn't already have his proof.

He took another step closer to Veem, and the Gran flinched again. He could force an aneurysm as he had with Ta's Chume, but what would be the point of that? He could try and wipe Veem's memory, as he had Ben Skywalker after the boy had learned Allana's parentage, but memory wipes were always risky. Veem's memories, especially, were all jumbled together. He could hardly

wipe out memory of Allana's parentage without wiping out most of the events on Kal'shikar, and when their prized prisoner couldn't answer any useful questions, Kalenda's people would have harsh questions for the Jedi who captured him.

So would Master Skywalker.

The easiest thing would be to kill him.

Jacen resisted the thought. He hated killing people when he didn't have to, even people like Veem who would destroy his family if they could.

But to protect his family, he saw no other option, and nothing was more important than that.

He took a breath and readied himself for what had to be done.

Jacen dropped the data-chip to the floor and stomped on it, again and again, until his heel hurt and there was nothing left to salvage. He took one step closer, then another. He hefted his lightsaber so its green glow lit the underside of the Gran's snout.

"W-W-Wait, what are you doing?" Veem gasped. "I surrender! You're a Jedi! You can't hurt me! I surrender!"

The words made Jacen hesitate. Was he a Jedi, really? He called himself one, but he'd ceased thinking of himself as being like other Jedi since his reeducation under Vergere. Even before that, he'd never been a comfortable member of the Jedi Order his uncle had been building. He's always wanted to be something *more*, even if he'd never understood what. He'd wanted it so badly he'd left everything behind for five whole years while he went searching for special knowledge and purpose, only to discover them in the most terrible way.

"No," he said, so softly it could barely be heard over the lightsaber's hum, "I'm not."

Veem blinked. "Then... what are you?"

A teacher. A student. A traitor. A Solo. All of those things and none of them. Right now, he was father protecting his child, not just because she *was* his child, but because the fate of the whole galaxy rested with her.

The Force had spoken to him and assigned him that task. It had brought him pain and would bring him greater pain to come, but pain was another thing he had learned a lot about from Vergere.

Pain was a teacher, a tool, and a master.

Pain was his destiny, and in the end pain and destiny could never be escaped. They could only be embraced.

"You know what I am," Jacen said grimly. "*Only* you."

Understanding lit in Veem's eyes. Understanding, and a strange acceptance.

Jacen flicked his wrist. Green light flashed, sizzled. There was a hard *thud* as Veem's head hit the deck. Slowly, the rest of his body sank to join it.

Jacen stood over the body for a long time. He didn't feel regret or satisfaction, but a gnawing emptiness. He waited for the Force to touch him as it had before and tell him that the murder he'd just committed had been right.

It told him nothing.

Finally, he shut off his lightsaber, turned his back on the body of his victim, and went to help the people he loved.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

In the end, they'd been forced to take refuge inside the battered old Baktoid droid troop carrier. The tanks had opened fire on the LAAT/i gunship as soon as they'd come into range, and it was only through the help of his father and K'Kruhk that Ben had managed to escape before the ship had been turned to fire, smoke, and twisted metal.

The gunship probably would never have been able to fly them out of the droid control ship anyway, but its destruction had shaken Ben to the core. Now they had no viable means of escape, and he couldn't help but blame himself for putting the gunship in the position to be destroyed. He didn't *regret* coming to his father's rescue, obviously, but felt sure that if he'd done something or anything differently, they wouldn't be pinned down now.

It was to his father's credit that he didn't try to drive home his son's failures. Instead Luke, like K'Kruhk, was acting like a proper adult and concentrating on the only thing that was really important right now: staying alive.

When they'd first sought shelter in the armored carrier's belly, the tanks had fired rounds into its brown sides that had shaken them fiercely and nearly toppled the carrier over. However, the droids quickly changed strategy. The tanks took positions on the carrier's flanks

while the cortosis droids began to advance toward the carrier's open forward hatch. They came slowly, firing every few steps, and though the hangar was now filled with smoke and the patter of cold water from the emergency shower system, Luke and Ben had an easy time deflecting their occasional laser blasts.

K'Kruhk meanwhile, was in the rear of the carrier. Despite the black scorch-marks on his robes, the only damage the Whiphid had taken during the fight had been a short-circuited lightsaber. He was fumbling the ancient cylinder open with his ungainly claws and struggling to fix whatever part of the device the cortosis had overloaded.

Ben really, really hoped he fixed it soon, because those droids were getting closer. It was pretty clear that whoever was commanding them wanted the Jedi all captured alive, and Ben was determined not to let that happen. He was, he told himself, ready to die before that.

Twelve years old and ready to die. The thought was chilling but he tried not to dwell on it. He just kept deflected last blasts and waiting, praying for his mother and Jacen and Tenel Ka to show up and do something brilliant to save them from his mess-up.

The overhead sprinklers were slowly but steadily dissipated the smoke that still unfurled from the smoldering gunship and darkened the breezeless hangar. The droids, much to his disappointment, were not affected by the water.

He could, however, see clear to the end of the hangar, where a massive set of blast doors lay half-open to reveal the ship's sleeping power core. Right in front of those doors was a battered disc-shaped Corellian freighter that reminded him a little bit of the *Millenium Falcon*, and he'd been watching it the whole time, wondering if there was a way to get to it and fly it out of here. That, of course, would require them to get past the

line of tanks and cortosis droids, and he wasn't quite sure how to do that yet, especially with his bad leg.

He wasn't sure when the lights inside the freighter came on. He just noticed them at one point between lulls in deflected laser blasts. At first he thought he was seeing things, but then he looked closer. He could spot running lights inside the freighter's cockpit. More than that, he could see a dim glow growing brighter from the horizontal band of ion engines that stretched across the freighter's aft.

He called to his father, "See that ship? It's getting ready to fly!"

"I see it!" Luke said. "I didn't see anyone enter."

"Might be a slave circuit."

"That ship could be our way out of here."

K'Kruhk's shaggy form suddenly appeared between them. He had his lightsaber clutched in his claws but did not ignite it.

"See that ship?" Ben stabbed a finger forward. "Might be our last ticket out of here."

"I'm not leaving without your mother," said Luke.

"Me neither, but if it's going to take off, we have to stop it."

"Is there a pilot inside?" asked K'Kruhk.

"Not that we can see. I think--"

"Wait!" Luke said. He deflected one laser blast and pointed, not to the ship but to the entrance to a nearby life tube. The doors were sliding open and two figures were running out. In the smoke and rain Ben could barely make them out, but one seemed to be a human and the other some blue-skinned humanoid alien.

Alsok, the Omwati geneticist he'd first seen in Mynock's Roost. It had to be. And he was guessing the human was the one Tenel Ka had met on Krizlar Station.

Both of them were sprinting toward the freighter. Suddenly the Omwati tripped and spilled face-down

onto the deck. The human didn't stop running. The landing ramp lowered to allow him entry and he only looked behind him after he'd leaped onto it and run almost to the top.

He paused for only a second as Alsok struggled to rise. Then he ducked into the ship. The ramp started to close.

Ben felt like shouting for him to stop, but it would do no good. Alsok seemed to be doing it as he staggered to his feet but the other man paid him no heed.

More lights in the cockpit went on. The freighter's ion engines grew brighter and filled the hangar with their roar.

Then, in unison, every droid tank swiveled its primary cannon toward the freighter and opened fire.

The explosion made the gunship's destruction seem tame. All three Jedi ducked as the concussive shockwave rippled through the confined space. Smoke and fire filled the air. The great thunderous roar of the explosion rang in Ben's ears. He fumbled in a soundless haze for the lightsaber he'd dropped. When he found and ignited it, its brilliant light was a wavering blur.

He looked across the hangar. The tanks were re-orienting their canons back to the troop carrier. The cortosis droids were almost at their shelter's mouth. The freighter was massive pile of debris now smoking under the rain of yet more emergency showers. Instead of dispersing the smoke the rain merely spread it. Ben choked on fumes and felt lightheaded.

Even in his confusion, he knew that their last hope of escape had been destroyed before his eyes, and despair surged to overtake him.

Then all his hope came back. The door to the lift slid open and two blazing lightsabers danced into the hangar. One was silver, the other violet. He didn't know where Jacen's green blade was, and he felt immediate worry for his cousin, but the sight nonetheless filled him with

courage. He could feel the same feeling welling within his father.

His mother was here for him, and it would be all right.

Mara Jade Skywalker and Tenel Ka Djo stepped into a maelstrom of smoke and flame.

It took Mara an agonized moment to realize what had happened. Someone must have just destroyed the freighter parked outside the dormant reactor core. She reached out with the Force to find both Ben and Luke alive and nearby, frightening and panicked but also newly confident at her arrival. She could sense K'Kruhk's ancient, stolid presence with them also.

There was only one conclusion she could make: Her targets had tried to escape in the freighter and been destroyed, perhaps by the very droid armies they commanded.

Or, more likely, the masters behind the droid armies had destroyed their living minions for attempted desertion.

Beside her, Tenel Ka said, "I sense something in the wreckage, Master."

"Nobody could have survived that."

Tenel Ka stalked forward, lightsaber held in front of her. Mara followed and when she reached out with the Force she, too, felt some stirrings of life.

Tenel Ka spotted him before Mara did: a being half-buried under a twisted slab of durasteel from the ship's outer hull. The being must have been outside the freighter when it was destroyed.

Without turning off her lightsaber, Tenel Ka used the Force to pick the slab off the man's lower body. As Mara got closer she saw pale blue skin beneath the caked-on ash, and feathery white hair turned dirty gray.

The Omwati struggled to sit up. He only seemed to realize the Jedi were around him when Mara held her

lightsaber in front of his face. His jaw went slack and he struggled to focus his eyes.

"Oh," he blinked. "Oh... damn."

"Neev Alsok," Mara named him.

"The bastard left me..." the dazed Omwati shook his head. "Guess I should... thank him..."

"*You* are the geneticist." Tenel Ka leaned in close and tilted her silve blade toward Alsok's throat. "Where is my daughter's blood sample?"

"Blood sample?" Alsok was bleeding from the head. He might have had a concussion. He might not remember anything.

He blinked again and awareness came to his eyes. He reached into his jacket and pulled out something: a small vial of red liquid.

"*Space* your samples!" He threw it. It shattered and sprayed blood across black dust. He grabbed another one, and another, and threw them all down. "This is the worst job I have *ever* had! I should have *never* left Coruscant!"

"Who hired you?" Tenel Ka pressed. "Who is your master?"

"My master?" His eyes went blank, his jaw slack. He started laughing. It was an ugly, awful cackle that stopped as suddenly as it started. He cried, "That's what *I'd* like to know!"

Then a laser blast cut in from the side and burned off the top of Alsok's head.

His body toppled back to the deck and Mara and Tenel Ka spun to see two cortosis-plated battle droids approaching. They began firing rounds from both hands and the two women were forced to repel shot after shot while awkwardly backstepping across jagged strewn debris. In the distance she heard the sounds of more laserfire. Her husband and son were under attack and she could do nothing to help them.

Something sharp caught Mara in the left thigh and she tumbled back. Her spine hit something hard and she cried in pain. Both droids began to pummel Tenel Ka, and she was unable to repel all their blasts. One shot took her in the right shoulder, one in the left calf, and a third right above the knee, and only then did she cry out.

Suddenly the whole deck began to shake around her. The strewn debris scraped and sparked as it was dragged across the deck by an invisible hand. Mara felt a blazing presence in the Force: powerful, angry, determined.

A familiar voice shouted in her head: *Stay down!*

Tenel Ka let herself fall. Jagged, twisted chunks of debris took to the air and flew. This time it took just one volley to fell both battle droids. Mara pushed herself up on her elbow and tried to stand, but pain shot through her leg. She looked down and saw blood spilling from her calf.

Jacen went to her as Tenel Ka slowly stood up. He planted a hand on Mara's shoulder and asked, "Are you all right?"

She wanted to say yes, of course, but right now her leg hurt too much to stand. She admitted, "I'm in no shape to help."

"It's okay," said Jacen.

He looked over his shoulder to where Tenel Ka was rising on wobbly legs. She was clutching her abdomen where she'd been previously hurt, and Mara could feel the anxiety rippling off of Jacen.

Mara squeezed his arm. "What about Veem?"

Jacen shook his head. "What about the other two?"

"Dead. Their bosses didn't want them telling stories."

"That's what I thought." He looked over his shoulder at Tenel Ka.

"Go to her," Mara said, "I'll be okay."

Once told, Jacen didn't hesitate. He rose up, turned for Tenel Ka, and-

-a laser blast took him in the shoulder. He cried in pain and fell. Tenel Ka lunged toward him as another volley cut over her head, and both of them tumbled together into the ash.

Mara fumbled for her lightsaber, little good it would do, and called out for her husband and son in the Force.

Looks like *they* would be the ones saving *her* after all.

Ben could feel his mother's panic rise to match his own, and it was all he could do to cling like a desperate child to his father's arm.

"What are we going to do?" He shouted over the sound of laserfire as his father batted another last blast into the face of an approaching battle droid.

Luke didn't response. Ben raised his lightsaber in his other hand and deflected yet another laser. The droids were so close he could see the individual cortosis panels bolted onto their thick bodies.

He spared a glance behind him. K'Kruhk was still clutching his unused lightsaber. His broad mouth seemed to be working but Ben couldn't hear what, if anything, he saw saying to himself. He could feel the old Jedi's confusion and despair in the Force, just as he could feel his and his father's and mother's, and a part of him wanted to yell at the Whiphid to get up and *fight*.

Maybe K'Kruhk felt his thoughts, because the massive Jedi rose on both feet. The approaching droids shifted their fire, only to have their blasts suddenly caught by a green lightsaber blade.

"Enough," K'Kruhk said, the raised his voice to a booming bellow. "*Enough!*"

The Whiphid raised a claw. An invisible hand swept across the hangar, catching the two closest droids and throwing them into the air. One heavy body smashed into the hangar deck; the other flew into the base of a tank and exploded. The tank smoked and groaned until

its repulsors failed and it slammed into the deck and exploded, leaving a geyser of flame behind.

Ben stared at K'Kruhk, jaw slack, shocked out of his despair.

"I am *sick* of failing," K'Kruhk lumbered toward the droid carrier's mouth. Outside, the remaining cortosis droids were already regrouping. "I am *sick* of beings dying for me."

"Master K'Kruhk!" Ben's father grabbed the Whiphid's scorched robe. "Wait, there's too many of them!"

Two droids fired, but K'Kruhk easily batted their blasts aside. To Luke he said, "I am sick of others dying in my stead."

"Master, don't!" Ben cried.

"*Enough!*" K'Kruhk bellowed one more time and threw himself into the fray.

As the Whiphid charged into the battle zone, the tanks lost all their hesitation. Cannon-fire rumbled through the hangar and more smoke filled air thick with artificial rain. The droids standing near the troop carrier pivoted and began firing at the Whiphid.

Despite his age and massive body, K'Kruhk moved with incredible speed. He threw himself into the air and slammed into the base of one of the tanks. His lightsaber cut one deep gouge in its hull, then another. He jumped off its hull just as two other tanks fired. The dying tank exploded under friendly fire and sent a pillar of flame up to the hangar ceiling.

Two cortosis droids moved to intercept K'Kruhk. The Whiphid jumped over their heads and let his conical hat drop down onto the head of one of the droids. He landed, spun around and knocked down the blinded droid with the sweep of his free arm. The second droid, still standing, fired a trio of shots into K'Kruhk's massive cloak. Ben heard him give a cry of pain, then saw his green lightsaber flash through the droid's left elbow

joint, cutting off its arm. The droid tried to shift its right arm to fire, but K'Kruhk pulled back his lightsaber and stabbed between two points in the armor.

He gracefully pulled his blade out of the dead droid, stabbed its point down into the unshielded back of the one lying at his feet, then deflected fire from two more approaching droids.

Luke Skywalker stepped out of the hatch. He said, "Stay here, Ben," and jumped into the battle.

Ben wanted to say something, *do* something, but he knew he was helpless here. So he just lay and watched in awe as two old Jedi Masters danced an incredible, deadly dance amidst the last of the droid army.

K'Kruhk moved quickly among the cortosis droids. His massive strength almost matched that of the mechanical soldiers, and he was able to knock another down with a swipe of his massive arm. Another droid fired into his cloak, and Ben was sure the Whiphid had been hit, but instead K'Kruhk reached out with a surge of desperate Force energy and wrenched the droid's torso from its legs. Luke, meanwhile, had charged another tank. The vehicle had spun its cannon to fire on K'Kruhk, and Luke reached out with the Force to crush the mouth of the cannon barrel. The droid pilot fired anyway, and the entire tank exploded a moment later.

Ben the two Masters in awe, but more than that he *felt* them. They drew their energy not from passion or anger, as Jacen sometimes did, but from a sense of supreme *calm*. They seemed to have surrendered their joys and hopes and doubts and even their fear of death. They were like thought embodied, a constant fluid motion, never stopping, never even tiring.

For a long wonderful moment, the old Jedi seemed invincible.

Then Ben saw the last tank swivel toward K'Kruhk. His father was tackling a cortosis droid; the Whiphid

was fending off two more. Ben raised his voice and shouted a warning, but no one could hear.

The cannon boomed inside the hangar. A massive cloud of black smoke filled the space where K'Kruhk had just stood. As the rain dispersed it Ben could see the scattered wreckage of two droid bodies. Then he saw a massive hump of scorched animal-skin robes. It might have been stirring, or it might have been Ben's imagination.

There was another explosion, and Ben saw his father pull away from a fiery pile of wreckage where the last tank had been. The last two cortosis droids moved toward his father, and Luke raised his lightsaber to block. Ben suddenly felt his father's exhaustion in the Force, the sting of his wounds, the ache of his joints and limbs.

His father was fading at last.

Ben tried to grab hold of the two droids with his mind, to wrench out their limbs or twist their bodies in two, like his father and K'Kruhk had just down. He even tried to summon his anger and desperation, but nothing seemed to give him the fuel to stop the two droids now narrowing on his father.

Suddenly the wreckage of the nearest tank took to the air. It cut into the battle droids from the side and swept them away. Ben looked across the wet, smoldering battlefield to see Tenel Ka standing on its very edge, her one hand outstretched as though she'd thrown the debris with her physical body.

Slowly, she lowered her hand. Ben looked back to his father and saw Luke fall to his knees, utterly exhausted.

Finally, it was over.

Ben pulled himself out of the cockpit and struggled across the battlefield. He used the Force to keep himself upright as he lurched toward his father. He found the leg of a dead battle droid and pulled it under his armpit so

he could use it as a crutch. That got him to Luke's side a little faster.

"Dad?" he had to keep from shouting. "Are you okay?"

He saw now the strain that fighting had on Luke Skywalker. Scorch-marks had torn his clothes. The wound on his forehead had come unstitched and he was bleeding again.

But the Grand Master said, "I'm okay, Ben. I'm okay. Check the others."

Ben hobbled over to K'Kruhk. Tenel Ka was already kneeling by the smoking pile of furs. Ben was relieved to see motion, and when he got close he saw Tenel Ka pull back some of the robes to reveal K'Kruhk's long, tusked face.

"Are you damaged, Master?" Tenel Ka asked.

"I have... had worse," the Whiphid wheezed. Ben saw he was clutching his side with one three-clawed hand. "I am... difficult to kill."

"What about mom and Jacen?" Ben asked Tenel Ka. He would know if they had died, but he was too dazed and frantic to really *feel* them right now.

"Your mom's okay," he heard another female voice and picked up his head.

A grin came to his face as he saw Mara and Jacen both hobbling away from the wreckage of the freighter. His mother leaning against Jacen and shuffling on one leg while her other bled from a calf wound. Jacen had a smoking hole in his shoulder but let Mara lean on his other one. Both of them winced and groaned with every step.

"Is it done?" Ben looked around. "Can we go? *Please?*"

Before anyone could say anything, a new wailing sound filled the hangar. Jacen swore and his mother's heart sunk, but there didn't seem to be a new round of droids coming to kill them.

“What is it?” he looked around. “What's coming?”

“Nothing's coming, Ben,” said his mother. She sounded on the verge of collapse.

“Then what-”

“Attention! Attention!” A male voice, vaguely accented, joined the wailing. “The self-destruct mechanism has been activated! We repeat, self-destruct has been activated! You have fifteen minutes to secure your valuables and leave the ship!”

“Oh,” Ben groaned, “You have *got* to be kidding me!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Tenel Ka could barely stand upright. The smoke that had filled the hangar made her light-headed, and the cold water that still rained down from the ceiling left her trembling with chills. The wound in her side, while not re-opened, continuously sent knives of pain through her body and it took every effort not to cry out in pain. Her limbs and shoulders had been skimmed by laser-blasts and each scorch-mark throbbed.

And the worst part was, she was still the most able-bodied Jedi present.

Over the clatter of falling water, the ship's automated alert system droned, "Self-destruct activated! You have fourteen minutes to secure your valuables and leave the ship!"

There was no possible way to evacuate everyone in fourteen minutes; even if they did get to the hangar mouth there was no way to safely escape into the mountains and get far enough away from the ship not to be caught in its blast radius. Jacen and Master Skywalker were exhausted, Ben and his mother couldn't walk, and Master K'Kruhk couldn't even stand.

"What do we do?" Ben was asking.

He looked around like he was pleading for someone to come up with a brilliant idea for escape. All he got was tired, helpless stares.

"No!" Ben shouted. "We didn't come this far just to die here!"

Still leaning against Jacen for support, Mara looked to her husband. "Any great ideas, Skywalker?"

The Grand Master looked more old and beaten than Tenel Ka had ever seen him. He merely shook his head and reached out to clasp Ben's hand.

Tears ran down the boy's face, and were lost in the falling rain. He said, "Dad, don't! We have to get up! We have to *do* something!"

"Jacen," Mara said, "Help me over. Please."

Jacen and his aunt both groaned and cringed as they shuffled over to where Master Skywalker and his son were huddled. Jacen helped lower Mara to the ground, where she wrapped one arm around Luke's shoulder and the other around Ben's.

The overhead voice droned, "You have thirteen minutes to secure your valuables and leave the ship!"

Jacen came up against Tenel Ka's side. She allowed herself to shift her weight against his and they both watched the Skywalkers in silence. Tenel Ka felt a strange twinge of envy; they stood on the verge of dying as they'd lived, together as a family. It was something she, Jacen, and their daughter would never know.

"What about Allana?" Jacen asked, quiet as a whisper.

She leaned her head on his shoulder. "I do not know. Alsok is dead, but he may have shared his secrets..."

"Veem didn't," Jacen said, voice suddenly firm. "I made sure of that."

She felt a wash of relief. "Thank you, Jacen... I knew I could depend on you."

"It's not enough." She could feel frustration coming off him. "I have things to do. I can't die like this."

"I know," She reached out and squeezed his hand. The Skywalkers, heads bowed toward each other, did not notice.

"This can't happen!" He squeezed her hand hard. "I have a, a..."

"Perhaps your destiny has brought you here," K'Kruhk lumbered up beside them. Jacen and Tenel Ka jerked in surprise but did not release each other's hands and did not pull away.

"I wanted a better destiny than this," Jacen rasped.

"As did I," the Whiphid turned his face upward, so water fell full on his snout. He closed his eyes as though savoring every drop.

The ship's voice kept going: "You have twelve minutes to secure your valuables and leave the ship!"

"I suppose I should thank you, young Jedi. I will die knowing that I have done my best," K'Kruhk said.

Jacen didn't respond. He tilted his face up too and let the cold rust-smelling water fall on it.

Because it was all she could do, Tenel Ka closed her eyes and felt the rain fall. The thought of abandoning Allana now rent her heart, but if she was going to die, she could think of no better way than protecting her child. Better yet, she could die with Jacen at her side, which was more than she'd had for most of her life.

The speakers said, "You have eleven minutes to secure your valuables and leave the ship!"

And then the hangar started shaking.

Tenel Ka's eyes popped open. The Skywalkers were lifting their heads and looking around incredulously.

Jacen slipped his hand out of hers. He said, "What's going on? It's too soon!" but she could feel the hope surging inside him.

A low roar came from the opposite end of the hangar, and then there was a rush of air that blew back the lingering smoke and tossed the rain sideways. Tenel Ka drew in breath and moved her hand to the hilt of her lightsaber. Luke Skywalker rose to his feet and grabbed his own weapon.

Three spaceships rounded the hangar's interior curves and passed into view. To Tenel Ka's relief, they were not Trade Federation vessels but manned starfighters. Each possessed a long body with a two-seater cockpit and broad wings that canted upward. It took her a stunned moment to place the design: SoroSuub Preybirds, commonly used by smugglers, pirates, and private militias across the galaxy. The front vessel was painted a deep black, while the ones behind it were decorated in elaborate red and blue motifs that highlighted the vaguely avian design of the ships.

She would have much preferred to see familiar Miy'tils, but right now she was in no position to chose.

The lead preybird killed its thrust engines and kicked in its repulsorlifts. It hovered at a meter above the deck and moved toward the huddled Jedi.

"I don't believe it," Mara Skywalker said.

She grabbed onto her husband's arm and pulled herself to standing height. Tenel Ka could feel amazement and incredulity and joy all rippling off her in the Force and had no idea why. Mara made no move for her lightsaber, but Tenel Ka did not put down her own.

The preybird's forward cockpit unhatched. The pilot stood up in his seat to survey the group. He was a humanoid male with grey-blue skin, a grey-streaked beard, and a mirror-dark visor over his eyes. He scanned the Jedi with an unreadable gaze before he tilted his head toward Mara.

"You have ten minutes to secure your valuables and leave the ship!"

The man grinned widely. "Looks like I got here just in time. Brought a little first aide supplies too, and it looks like you need it."

"Mazzic, how did you *get* here?" Mara gaped. "How did you- no, never mind. Do you have room for all of us?"

"Well, I got empty backseats." Mazzic scratched his beard. "I didn't expect there to be *six* of you, though. Where'd you pick up the big guy?"

"Long story." Mara grabbed Ben and pulled him upright. "Get in the backseat, Ben. Now."

The boy, apparently, knew who his savior was, but he looked reluctant to join him. As Ben hesitated, the other two preybirds opened their own cockpits. From the left one rose a tall, pale woman with dark braids piled atop her head. A green-skinned Rodian emerged from the other.

"Shada!" Mara exclaimed. "Does that mean—"

"Karrde's picking up *Shadow* right now," the woman said. "Let's go. We don't have much time."

"Hey," Mazzic interjected, "*I* was the one who picked up the distress call."

"Yes, and I was the one who wanted to search this ship," Shada said.

"You have nine minutes to secure your valuables and leave the ship!" boomed the speakers.

"Ben, Luke, go ride with Shada," Mara said. "Jacen, Tenel Ka, go with Griv! Now!"

"Mom, what about you?" Ben asked.

As Jacen and Tenel Ka moved to the blue preybird, Mara looked hesitantly at K'Kruhk. There was no way the two of them would fit in the back of Mazzic's fighter and they both knew it.

"It is all right," The old Whiphid didn't move from his spot. "You have given me the chance for some small redemption. I am grateful."

"Space that," Jacen said. "Mazzic, think you can fly slow and low until we get to Karrde's ship?"

The smuggler raised an eyebrow. "You want me to fly out of here with a *Whiphid* hanging off my wing?"

"Hey," Jacen gestured to K'Kruhk, "Those claws have to be good for something, right?"

For a moment he hesitated, and Tenel Ka was afraid the old Jedi would decline and resign himself to dying on here Kal'shikar.

Then his broad mouth widened and his tusks thrust upward in what she realized what the Whiphid version of a smile.

The speakers called, "You have either minutes to secure your valuables and leave the ship!"

"All right," said K'Kruhk, "It sounds like... an adventure."

Two minutes later, the preybirds had loaded their passengers and were swiveling around to exit the hangar. Ben and Luke had squeezed into Shada's ship, Jacen and Tenel Ka were nestled into Griv's, and Mara was backseating Mazzic. The old wounded Whiphid had somehow found the strength to cling the Mazzic wing with both three-clawed hands, his big body as flat against the wing as he could make it.

Slowly, steadily, the preybirds accelerated down the cured hangar toward its mouth.

Normally Tenel Ka would not have minded being pressed into Jacen's lap with his arms wrapped around her waist, but right now her head was knocking against the cockpit's low ceiling and she was afraid that a sudden acceleration would send her jumping through the barrier that separated their cockpit from the pilot's.

Yet when the preybird rushed out of the hangar she barely felt a thing. The harsh interior lights of the ship fell away and were replaced by twilight gloom, but a gloom that seemed lighter than what they'd left behind. She angled herself toward the western window and peered downward to see K'Kruhk clinging to Mazzic's wing as he flew beneath the other craft.

There was a flash of light as the control ship exploded behind them. Tenel Ka shifted to get a look, but Jacen blocked her angle. His face was lit by a smile, slanted

and relieved, and she felt herself returning it. She willed herself to relax and let her body go limp against Jacen's.

He tapped the eastern window, where old scratches gleamed white in new daylight.

"Would you look at that," he said, and held her tighter. "Sun's coming up."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

In the end, Mara had to admit the Force had been with them after all. The Force, or good old friends, which was probably the next best thing.

Mazzic's preybirds had flown them all the way to *Wild Karrde*, which was hanging in Kal'shikar's lower atmosphere after scooping up *Jade Shadow* and pulling her into a central cargo hold that was, for the time being, luckily emptied of grain. After that, both *Wilde Karrde* and *Eyeflash* had left orbit and jumped to hyperspace, leaving Kal'shikar alone once more.

The most lucky part of all was that *Wilde Karrde's* sick bay was well-stocked. As the medical droid wrapped Mara's calf in bacta-wet bandages, Karrde explained that he'd loaded every bit of medical supplies they had on Ukio into his ship the moment Mazzic relayed their distress call.

"Always thinking ahead, that's you," Mara had admitted. "Glad to see retirement hasn't dulled your wits."

Karrde'd crossed his arms over his chest and rolled his eyes. "Oh, please Mara, this is *me*."

Wilde Karrde had everything short of a full-fledged bacta tank. That meant stitches for Luke's head, microsutures for Tenel Ka, and more bacta bandages for Jacen's wounds. Ben, despite being the one who came to

Kal'shikar damaged, seemed to have received minimal wounds, which made Mara feel vaguely content as mother and protector.

The one who could have most used a full bacta tank was K'Kruhk. The old Whiphid had summoned his superhuman strength to cling to Mazzic's preybird as they escaped the control ship, but he had still taken serious damage during the fight. They had to push together both medical beds, sprawl his big shaggy body across them, and perform three hours' worth of minor operations, stitching, and fluid transfusion. To Mara's relief, but not really surprise, Shada turned out to be a very competent battlefield medic. She had even gained experience with Whiphid physiology somewhere along the line.

When Mara asked Karrde where she'd picked that up, her old boss had just shrugged and said, with a sheepish little grin, "I like a woman who can surprise me."

Mara had chosen a husband who was as dependable and *unsurprising* as they came. She wasn't sure what that said about her, but right now she was glad for it. Luke had found an empty old bunk (Chin's room, or maybe Dankin's) to lay down and enter a healing trance. Knowing Luke, he'd wake up in a few hours ready to save the galaxy all over again.

Mara wasn't quite at that stage yet. Her leg had been patched up, and she could walk with only mild discomfort, but their experience on Kal'shikar bothered her in a way she couldn't quite pin down. She was used to close brushes with death. Almost losing Ben had shaken her, but she didn't think that was it. If anything, the boy had recovered his good humor better than anyone, though behind his confident smile was a grim edginess.

But there was something else, something she couldn't pin down, so she decided to talk it over with Karrde.

They went to the same old, scratched-up table they'd sat at a few days previous and dropped themselves down on stiff leather cushions to hack it out.

Mara told him everything in order, from their initial crash-landing on Kal'shikar to the moment of Mazzic's rescue. All the time he listened intently, without asking questions.

When she finished, she asked him, "Did you notice any ships leaving Kal'shikar when you arrived?"

"Nothing." Karrde shook his head. "No thrust trails either, and I can assure you we looked. *Eyeflash* stayed in outer orbit the whole time and didn't detect any ships leaving."

Mara leaned back in the booth and scowled. "There was clearly somebody besides Veem and Alsok behind the cloning operation. They wouldn't have stayed behind on the ship to be destroyed, which means they either escaped without us noticing or they were never there to begin with."

"We didn't pick up any transmissions coming in or out of the system."

"That doesn't mean much. That droid army could have been acting entirely on pre-programed orders."

"Including when they killed Veem and Alsok?"

"Their software could have identified their actions as treason and executed them. It wouldn't be hard to program. As it is, we might never know, and that bothers me a lot. *Somebody* was trying to clone Jedi, and we have no idea who or why they were doing it."

"Yes, I can see how that's troublesome. Have you talked to Kalenda's people? I thought they were trying to follow a money trail."

"I have, but they still haven't found anything. Veem was using so many dummy accounts and fake names they might never trace them all. He was a clever *sleemo*, I'll give him that."

"So were his bosses, apparently. For what it's worth, I'll try my contacts and see what I can find."

"Thanks. I appreciate that." She crossed her arms over her chest. "And while I worry about invisible threats to the Jedi Order, there's something even *more* pressing to worry about."

"Oh? What's that?"

"How I'm going to pay for *Shadow*'s repairs," she grouched.

Karrde chuckled. "Can't you bill Kalenda for damages incurred?"

"I can try, but she won't be happy about it. You know any good mechanics who can fix her up for cheap?"

"Oh, I'm sure I can think of something. Just give me a little time."

"Thanks."

"You know, at least you didn't total *Shadow* like your last two ships."

She scowled. He laughed. The chamber door slid open and Mazzic stopped in the doorway, took in their expressions, and asked, "Okay, what did I miss?"

"Nothing," Karrde said. "Mara was just being grouchy."

"Miss Jade's always been grouchy. What can you do?" Mazzic shrugged and hefted a bottle of some amber-colored ale. "Label's torn off, so I'm not sure what's inside. Griv found it in one of the crew quarters."

"Did he now?" Karrde raised an eyebrow. "Not sure I like the sound of that."

"It was Dankin's old room," Shada's voice said from the other side of the door.

Mazzic stepped through the threshold and took a seat. Shada and Griv followed. The Rodian placed five glass tumblers on the table. They looked like they hadn't been cleaned since Thrawn was alive.

"You're serious." Mara kept frowning.

"I think this deserves a serious investigation," Griv said.

Karrde glanced at Shada "Have you experience with poisons, my dear?"

"I'm willing to test it out," Shada said coolly.

With visible effort, she pulled the cap off the bottle and a rich, musky smell filled the room. She tipped the bottle, poured some liquid into a glass, and carefully tasted it.

"It's not poison," Shada said. "It's not *good*, but it's not poison. Some kind of whiskey, maybe Raltiirian."

"Okay, let's try this out" Mazzic took the bottle and filled the other cups. He gracefully slid them across the marked-up table, spilling only a little bit.

Mara took the cup cautiously in one hand and took a sip. It was strong and heady and made her cough.

"I liked your wine better," she told Karrde.

"Agreed," Shada said.

"Fair enough," Karrde said after his first sip. He held the glass up, considering, and said, "Still, it would be a shame to waste it."

"True," said Shada. "I doubt Dankin wants it back."

"That's the spirit," grinned Mazzic. "Come on, let's toast to a job well done."

Mara frowned again, but she didn't want to start spilling out all her worries.

Mazzic saw her expression and said, "Come on, you're not dead. You get to fight another day. That counts as a win, doesn't it?"

He had a point there. After all the stages her life had gone through, after all the goals she'd striven for, that might have been the one constant through them all.

She lifted her glass. "Okay, then. Here's to fighting another day."

"Fight another day," they all echoed, and tipped their glasses up.

Mara brought her down and took another drink. It really couldn't compare to Karrde's wine, but she could get used to it. She'd certainly downed worse stuff during her years aboard *Wile Karrde*. Hell, she'd had worse sitting at this very table with Dankin, Aves, H'sishi, Chin, and all the rest.

A thought came to her out of nowhere. She snapped her fingers and pointed to Karrde. "I remember."

He stared. "Remember what?"

"Syndic Hart," she grinned. "Captain of the *Uwanna Buyer*."

A smile spread on Karrde's face. "Very good. *Very* good, Miss Marniss."

"I'm missing something, aren't I?" Mazzic frowned.

Mara smiled and took another drink. Maybe this stuff was jarring old memories. The thought made her feel warm inside.

If today wasn't a total victory, well, it could feel like one for a little while.

It felt weird, being alive.

For a few awful, eternal minutes on the command ship, Ben Skywalker had been certain he was about to die. He'd grabbed hold of his mother and father and touched them both in the Force and he'd shared with them all his fear and regret, and they'd tried their best to give him strength even though he could feel they were tearing up inside too.

Now he was alive and safe and every minute he veered back and forth between shock and fear and confidence and, most of all, a giddy relief. He wondered if this was what Jacen and his parents felt like every day. He hoped it was something you got used to, because if his adult life was going to be anything like theirs, he was going to go through a lot more days like today.

Ben found a place inside *Wild Karrde's* winding halls to lie down and simply rest. He didn't need a healing trance like his dad or K'Kruhk, but he certainly needed to regain his strength and calm his frazzled nerves. Unfortunately, laying down only seemed to make him more restless, so he picked up the crutch they'd found in *Wild Karrde's* medical bay and started hobbling around.

He didn't know how his mother found her way around the tangled insides of this ship. Maybe you *needed* to live here for years before you could tell one narrow gray hallway from another. Whatever the case, Ben eventually found himself back in the medical bay.

He was surprised to see both his father and K'Kruhk there. Luke was seated in a chair. The Whiphid, while still on the pushed-together beds, was at least sitting upright. In addition to patching up his wounds, Shada and the medical droid had washed and groomed K'Kruhk's tangled fur and replaced his torn robe with a white blanket. The attempt at a clear, orderly appearance was incongruous on the Whiphid's long, fierce face. As Ben hobbled over to them he noticed that one of K'Kruhk's tusks had been partially chipped off. Stitches had been sewn through a cut over his left eye, but the wound looked deep enough that it might leave a scar.

He guessed, however, that K'Kruhk knew more about scars than he ever would.

"Hello, Ben," Luke said softly. "I'm glad to see you're up and about."

"Yeah, I'm doing okay," he said.

For some reason he had a hard time holding his father's gaze. When they'd huddled together and waited for death he'd allowed all his inhibitions to drop and shared all his desperate hopes and fears with his parents.

Now that he had a future again, he felt more like a twelve-year-old boy than ever. He didn't know why it worked that way, but it did.

He turned his attention to K'Kruhk. "How are you healing, Master?"

"I will recover," he nodded.

"What will you do now?"

K'Kruhk glanced at his father. This was probably the issue they'd been discussing. He shifted his yellow eyes back to Ben and said, "I believe I will travel for a time. When I was on Kal'shikar I did not want to leave, but now that it is behind me I find I want to see what has become of the galaxy in my absence."

"Well, you have missed out a lot."

"I know. I do not know what purpose my wandering will serve, but I believe I can manage without purpose for a while."

"You're always welcome at the Temple," Luke said. "I'm sure the Jedi of my generation and Ben's could learn much from your wisdom."

"Wisdom?" K'Kruhk shook his head. "The man who believes himself wise is always a fool. I have much to learn and I know it. That's why I won't be going to Coruscant for a while."

"Still," Luke said, "You'll always be welcome."

"Thank you," K'Kruhk nodded. He pulled one three-clawed hand out from under his sheet and looked at it. "Wherever I go, I want it to be peaceful."

"You could go to Tatooine," Luke suggested. "Trust me, nothing *ever* happens there."

"I will consider it." K'Kruhk's lips curled around his tusks like a smile. "I wish the best for you and your son. I believe he will be a very fine Jedi one day."

Ben blushed. "Thanks, but I have a way to go."

K'Kruhk looked at his father. "He has had a good teacher, I think."

Something serious settled over Luke's face. Whether he knew it or not, K'Kruhk had touched on the heart of the awkwardness Ben was currently feeling.

Softly, his father said, "Ben, do you still want to keep training under Jacen?"

He nodded once and waited for judgment.

"Well, I have to admit that none of the apprentices your age in the Temple could have handled themselves like you did today. And I also have to admit that your cousin probably deserves some credit for that."

"You mean I can stay with Jacen?"

"Within certain guidelines," his father nodded. "For one, he's going to clear all the missions you go on with me. No more stake-outs in dive bars and falling off landspeeders."

"I'm fine with that, believe me. Have you told Jacen?"

"Not yet." the old Grand Master's smile looked almost embarrassed. "I figured you would want to do that."

"No problem," Ben said. He was already looking forward to it.

It had been decided that *Wild Karrde* would be taking an indirect route back to Coruscant. First Mazzic and his people returned to *Eyeflash* and set course for Ord Mantell. Then they stopped by at Roche to deliver *Jade Shadow* to some of Karrde's smuggler friends who promised to fix the battered ship at discount price. While at the depot, K'Kruhk left them and bought passage on a freighter that would carry him all the way to the edge of Wild Space. He'd said, quite cheerfully, that he had no idea what he'd find there.

Finally, they went to Hapes.

Their meandering course had stretched the trip out by several days, but no one seemed to mind, least of all Tenel Ka. Though they were surrounded by other people most of the time, they found ways to slip away during nighttime hours when no one was watching. Tenel Ka savored those too-brief nights, because she did not know when they would come again.

As always, it seemed like the Queen of Hapes had little control over her own life.

When *Wild Karrde* entered Hapan orbit, a Miy'tari shuttle came up to dock. She was pleased when Major Espara and a handful of Hapan Guards stepped out of the airlock to greet her. A small crowd had gathered to say goodbye, including the Skywalkers and Talon Karrde.

"Greetings, Your Majesty." Espara bowed. "I am glad to see you are safe."

"I have had good protectors." Tenel Ka gestured to Jacen and the Skywalkers.

Espara eyed the Jedi suspiciously, but bowed again.

The Grand Master stepped up and took Tenel Ka's hand. "Thank you for the help you've given, Your Majesty. I'm sorry I couldn't do more."

"That's what I should be telling you, Master Skywalker. The enemy's cloning facility has been destroyed, as well as the blood samples, but we still do not know for certain what data they gleaned from my daughter's DNA."

"We've been in touch with Alliance Intelligence. They're heightening their scrutiny of all existing cloning facilities and cloning experts."

"That is good to know. However, there may be more relics from the Clone Wars out there, waiting to be used."

"It's possible," Skywalker admitted. "We'll just have to keep searching."

"Indeed." She shifted her attention to the other Jedi. Ben was still leaning on his crutch, but Mara to be able to stand under her own power. As for Jacen, he stood with arms crossed and a polite smile on his face. When their eyes met he inclined his head.

She would have preferred to say a final goodbye to Jacen alone, but they'd both known it would never

happen, and had shared more intimate farewells the night before.

As always, she had to be satisfied with what she possessed at the moment.

"Thank you all for your help," she affected her best regal tones for the sake of Espara and the guards. "The Hapes Consortium greatly appreciates your aid, as well as your friendship."

"Don't hesitate to call if you need help again," Mara said.

"I certainly won't. But for now we must part." She let her eyes hold Jacen's. She didn't dare touch him in the Force, but the melancholy intensity of his dark gaze said everything.

It lasted only a second. Tenel Ka turned to face the airlock and marched forward. Her guards fell in behind her. The docking tube swallowed her and she did not look back, even as grief welled in her throat.

The shuttle disengaged from *Wild Karrde* and fell toward Hapes. It was a flight she had seen many times, but she found herself leaning forward in her seat behind Espara, intent on savoring every streak of white cloud and every flash of light that rippled across the oceans far below.

For better or worse, this was her home.

When her shuttle landed she could see who was waiting for her on the landing pad. It took all her honed royal restraint to keep from bounding down the landing ramp.

Her father, strong and healthy again, stood with Allana hoisted in his arms. The girl smiled and waved at her mother. Taryn and Trista stood on either side with their hands clasped behind their backs in stiff martial posture, but they had relieved smiles on their faces.

"You're back, mom!" Allana said, and struggled in her grandfather's arms. At three years old she was getting

big, and Isolder crouched down to let her run free to meet her mother.

Tenel Ka crouched down and let Allana fall against her. She held her daughter tight with one arm and pressed her cheek against the crown of her little head. Allana may have been getting bigger, but she was Tenel Ka's child, small and fragile and in need of protection. She always would be.

"I'm glad to see you're all right," Isolder said.

"Likewise, father."

"You had us worried, Your Majesty." Trista said severely.

"There was never cause for concern," Tenel Ka lied.

"Mommy, what happened when you were away?" Allana asked. Her voice was muffled against her mother's breast.

"Nothing important." She shifted her hand to stroke her daughter's hair. She closed her eyes and savored the sensation of her daughter's touch, the nearness of her father and cousins. She was home again with her family, so painfully short of whole.

It was not what she wanted, but she could live with it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

One slim shuttlecraft fell toward the planet. Its thrust engines burned blood-red as it flared through the atmosphere. Soon it breached the layer of dark storm-clouds and flew over a landscape of jagged mountains and barren plains. From time to time the shuttle passed over cracked and fallen ruins that were all that remained of a great interstellar empire. Despite its history and fame, no tourists braved this desolate world. Even beings untrained in the Force could sense the ancient menace that lingered on Korriban.

The shuttle dove down into a valley that cut through the landscape like a knife-carved wound. Towering statues of ancient lords seated on elegant thrones had been carved out of the rock-face, but their details had been effaced by thousands of years of wind and rain and rare, brave vandals. One of the statues had tumbled forward, and its monolithic stones now lay scattered across the valley floor. A massive, gaping black cavern mouth remained where the statue had once rested.

The shuttle dove inside.

It did not have far to go. The shuttle shut off its blood-red engines and lowered itself onto a landing pad. Dician embarked first, followed by Darth Vidious. Waiting for them was a single Chagrian, taller even than Vidious but bearing the same elaborate red-and-black

tattoos on his face. He wore a long black robe and had his hands folded patiently in front of him.

"Thank you for greeting us, Lord Wyyrlok," Vidious bowed slightly and Dician did the same.

The Chagrian looked down at them both without saying anything. Dician could feel the intensity of his gold-red glare on the back of her head. The mission on Kal'shikar had not gone according to plan, and while they had been able to salvage the most critical elements of their operation, and avoid being revealed to the Jedi Order, Dician still felt their mission carried the taint of failure.

Darth Wyyrlok had executed beings for less.

"Come," Wyyrlok rumbled, and turned around.

Dician and Vidious followed his trailing black cloak down old tunnels carved into the rock. They eventually reached a conference room of incongruously recent manufacture. The table and ceiling were made mirror-black metal and glowlamps hung from above. Wyyrlok gestured them to sit at two of the chairs, but did not move for one himself. He seemed to be staring blankly at the stone-hewn wall ahead.

It was said that Darth Wyyrlok could sense the dreaming thoughts of his Master. Dician, who had examined her Master's body in stasis, had seen nothing to prove this theory, but she knew much of the Dark Side of the Force was beyond her understanding, and always would be.

Therefore, she contented herself to serve her Master's purpose. She only hoped that she was still considered worthy to serve.

Dician felt uncomfortable, but she could not sense the same disquiet from Darth Vidious. As always, the Devaronian was stoic and difficult to read. He was a far cry from the Sith Lords she'd been told about in her youth, always raging and wrathful.

Finally, Wyyrllok came back to them. He lowered himself into the chair opposite them and stared across the table with his hands folded on the mirror-dark surface. His posture bespoke a middling business manager, but his blazing eyes and tattooed face betrayed the Dark Side energy that fueled him.

“Tell me what was salvaged,” he said.

It was not the start she wanted. Dician said, “We recovered eight of the twelve clones we were growing. We prioritized the ones we thought most valuable, including your clone and that of Lord Vidious.”

“Which were left behind?”

“Cilghal. Ulaha Kore. Streen. Kirana Ti. The Spaarti Tubes themselves had to be sacrificed. The remaining clones have been placed in stasis. They should be able to remain that way for at least a year before permanent suffering damage.”

“They will not have to wait that long. Lord Nether's expedition to the Unknown Regions has proven... fruitful.”

With controlled interest, Dician asked, “Fruitful how, my lord?”

“They have uncovered Spaarti tubes used by Grand Admiral Thrawn in *his* attempts to clone Jedi. These tubes are improvements on the ones used in the Clone Wars. We believe Thrawn was trying to defeat the propensity toward madness in Spaarti-cloned Jedi.”

“Excellent,” Dician hissed.

That instability had been the biggest pitfall of their Jedi cloning program. Dician had been doing experiments with recovered Rakatan technology to counter this effect, and combining her research with those of Thrawn's scientists would be most exciting.

Assuming Wyyrllok let her live.

Beside her, Vidious asked, “How many tubes were recovered?”

"Enough for the clones recovered from Kal'shikar." Wyyrlok said. "What became of your agents?"

"They are all dead," said Vidious. That had been the plan from the start, though there had been some initial interest in Paks Veem. The Gran, unfortunately, had proven too small-minded and petty to serve the Sith as well as the Jedi.

"Are you certain?" Wyyrlok pressed.

"We had the droids kill two of them. The Jedi took care of Paks Veem for us."

Wyyrlok raised a hairless brow. "Did they?"

"It was Jacen Solo, Lord Wyyrlok," Dician said. "We saw it on the security camera. He cornered Paks Veem, disarmed him, and *then* cut off his head."

She didn't expect Wyyrlok to smile on getting that tasty morsel, but some interest showed on his face. "We will watch Jedi Solo closely. What of Alsok's research?"

"Recovered, My Lord." She didn't say that of the scientists in his employ, she was the one best suited to continue Alsok's work. She didn't have to. Wyyrlok was no fool.

"What of the blood samples from the Hapan Queen?" he asked.

"They died with Alsok," Vidious said. They had both agreed not to mention that they'd had Jacen Solo's DNA in their grasp as well. "We greatly apologize. We should have known that our agents would try to flee."

Wyyrlok drummed red-and-black fingers on the tabletop. "What have the Jedi learned about us?"

"They never saw us," Dician said firmly. "I doubt they believe Veem orchestrated the entire incident, but they know nothing about our involvement. We destroyed the Federation vessel and the Spaarti tubes to make sure of that."

"Nonetheless, the Jedi will be vigilant." His fingers kept drumming.

"We can be patient," Vidious said. "A new galactic crisis is sure to pop up in the future, and the Master can wait many years."

"Very true," Wyyrlok shifted his attention to Dician. "If Project Iteration is a success, we can *all* wait many years for the Jedi to become distracted."

She inclined her head. "I will do my best to bring it about, Lord Wyyrlok."

The Chagrian rose to his feet. "Though the Sith are many now, we will not repeat the mistakes of Lord Kaan. Though many, we will act as one, as Palpatine and Bane did. We will wait, and when the Jedi have grown weak through their own foolish choices we will come at them as a knife in the dark."

"If the Master wills it," Vidious said, "We will carry it out."

"Everything the Master wills shall come true in time," said Wyyrlok. "You may rest for a day. Then you will take your vessel, including its clones, and meet Darth Nether in the Unknown Regions."

"As you command," Dician bowed her head.

"As the Master wills," Wyyrlok reminded her. He turned on a heel and walked out of the chamber, leaving Dician and Vidious alone.

Neither moved. Neither spoke. There didn't seem anything *to* say. Their mistakes had been forgiven, and they had more work to do in service of the One Sith. All in all, that made it a good day.

Vidious stood first. He looked down at her and said, "Come. There's still work to be done."

"I live to serve." She got to her feet.

"Yes. Don't we all?"

EPILOGUE

LIES

Jacen felt restless after Tenel Ka's departure, though he tried not to show it. It became harder for him to sleep without her warmth next to his. When she'd been beside him in the dark, he'd been able to convince himself that everything he'd done had been right.

He wasn't just thinking about Paks Veem. He was thinking about Ta'a Chume, Raynar Thul, and the assault on the Chiss supply depot that sparked the Swarm War. He was thinking about Vergere and the Yuuzhan Vong and his dead brother.

Most of all he thought about the anger and accusation in his sister's face the last time they'd talked. He didn't know why Jaina should come to his thoughts now, except, perhaps, because his sister had once been half his life.

They were set to arrive on Coruscant at morning local time, and *Wild Karrde's* internal chronometer was set to match. Jacen spent his last sleepless night aboard wandering the dull gray halls, tired and anxious. When the time of arrival drew near he went into the kitchen and fixed himself a cup of caf. He wasn't normally a caf-drinker but he made this mug extra-strong. Feeling slightly reenergized, he found his way to one of the few

viewports looking out into the blue blur of hyperspace and stood in front of it for a while, letting the caf wake him up and trying to push away the doubts he couldn't name.

The sleeplessness must have gnawed away at his Force powers, because he only noticed his aunt had snuck up behind him when she whispered in his ear, "I always liked this spot."

Jacen jumped forward, spilling a little caf. Mara chuckled. "Sorry to startle you."

"No, it's all right," Jacen shook his head. "I just, ah, wasn't paying attention."

"It's fine." Mara had poured her own drink into a steaming mug. She sidled next to her nephew and sipped it. "This place was always pretty private, so I used to come here when I needed time to think about things."

"Like what? Killing Uncle Luke?" As soon as he said it he regretted it. His nerves must have been really frayed and he cursed himself for letting it show.

Mara didn't seem offended. She sipped her drink and said, "That, and a lot of other things. Like, you know, marrying him."

"Oh yeah. That too."

"That too." Another drink. "It's amazing how some things don't change, even all *you've* changed. It can be comforting."

"I guess so," Jacen said.

He didn't know if he would ever really understand what she meant. All of his old homes had been destroyed by the Yuuzhan Vong, and while he regretted that, it had also made it easier for him to move forward and leave his old self behind.

Something hung between them and they both knew what it was. Jacen figured it was best just to come out and say it.

"So, I still get to train Ben."

"I heard." He could hear the quiet satisfaction in her voice and was heartened by it. "Just don't get too cocky, Jacen. No more taking my kid on crazy adventures in seedy cantinas. If Ben gets hurt, I'm holding you responsible."

"Don't worry, Aunt Mara. You know I'd never do anything to keep Ben safe. He's special."

"Your damned right he is. He's my kid," she said cheerily. "If anything happens to him, I'm coming after you, and you don't want to see me when I'm angry."

"Oh, I'm sure I don't," Jacen chuckled.

"He really does respect you, you know." Her tone became serious. "The way he looks at you sometimes, well, makes me a little envious."

"He admires you and Uncle Luke. Even if he doesn't act like it. Ben's just trying to figure out what he wants to be. I'm trying to help him."

"I know, and I really am grateful. So is Luke, even if he doesn't act like it sometimes." Mara sighed a little.

"Parenting seems hard," he said neutrally.

"You should try it sometime."

He tensed slightly, uncertain if that was a flippant remark or if she was probing deeper. With Mara it was hard to tell. He gave an easy, natural-sounding laugh and said, "Watching over *your* kid is enough of a responsibility I don't think I could take any more pressure."

"I never thought I could either, but here we are."

"Well, Ben *is* your destiny. Or something like that."

"Or something like that," She smiled softly sipped a little more caf. "So, at least something good came from all this."

"More than one thing, I hope. We rescued an old Jedi Master from exile. We foiled a plot to clone a bunch of Jedi, including Tenel Ka and her child, not to mention

me. And the galaxy has a few less low-lives. I'd say that's pretty successful overall."

"We still don't know who was behind it. That's still worrying."

Jacen didn't respond. He *did* know, though he could never prove it and never reveal it. He didn't even know what to *do* about it. All he knew was that the Dark Man of his vision was real, he was out there, and he had to be stopped. Jacen didn't know *who* he was or *how* to stop him, but he knew he would do everything in his power to preserve the fragile peace that had been forged since the Yuuzhan Vong War.

This mission had reminded him of his painful destiny more than anything since his vision in the Pool of Knowledge nearly five years ago. That, more than anything, must have been why he was so unsettled. Destiny was a heavy burden and he'd tried to ignore it when he could.

"It's a shame we couldn't take any of them alive," Mara muttered over the rim of her mug.

"Mazzic only had a limited number of seats," Jacen reminded her.

She scowled at him. "You know what I mean. Even one of them might have been able to answer critical questions. I trust Kalenda's people to dig pretty deep, but, well..."

"Some things can only be handled by Jedi."

"I suppose so. If we'd been able to get just Paks Veem, that would have helped a lot."

"I'm sorry I couldn't save him," Jacen lied.

"I'm sure you tried," Mara sighed and drank a little more. A silence settled over the cabin as they watched the hypnotic blur of hyperspace.

A thought came to his head then, a strange ridiculous fancy. He could tell Mara that he'd killed Paks Veem, and why he'd done it. She would be angry at first, surely,

but if he went into detail about everything that had led him to that choice, including his vision of the Dark Man, his love affair with Tenel Ka, and the doom hanging over their daughter, she might see the rightness of his actions.

Because of her unorthodox training Mara could understand him in away that his uncle or sister never could. It was why she'd supported his training Ben. In the end, Ben was Mara's destiny, just as Allana was Jacen's. Future generations pressed down on them with a weight he had never imagined until the moment he first saw newborn Allana in her mother's arms.

If he could tell anyone, it would be her.

Jacen slapped the thought away. He'd never dared tell Tenel Ka what he had done to Ta'a Chume, and he certainly hadn't told her about Paks Veem. He told himself it was to protect her from becoming entangled with the Dark Man, but he knew it went deeper than that. As much as he loved Tenel Ka, he also feared losing that love, and for that reason he kept dire secrets from her. He knew she'd never approve of some of his actions, and if she couldn't, neither could Mara.

It was a weight he'd have to carry by himself. He'd known that since his vision in the Pool of Knowledge. That certainty made him feel alone and afraid, but also strong somehow.

"Can I ask you a question?" Mara asked, jarring him out of his reverie.

"Of course." He steadied his shaking hand.

"It's personal."

She knows, he thought. About Tenel Ka. About Allana. They'd tried to hide everything but Mara was perceptive. If anyone could have guessed, it would have been her.

Maybe he was going to have to beg for her understanding after all.

"Go ahead," he said, mouth very dry.

"When are you going to patch things up with your sister?"

He blinked. He bleated a giddy laugh. Mara gave him a strange look and he shook his head.

"What's between me and Jaina is... a stupid misunderstanding. That's all. It's nothing to get concerned about, really."

"Jacen, this has dragged on for a long time. *Years*. You two avoid each other whenever you're both at the Temple. Everyone can see it."

It bothered him that his problems were so transparent, so public. "We've had... disagreements. Ever since the Swarm War, and the attack on the Chiss supply depot. It's been a little tense. But it's nothing serious, I swear."

She gave him an I-don't-believe-you stare. He looked back to the blur outside their window and didn't respond.

Eventually, Mara sighed and said, "Listen, you're both adults and I can't tell you what to do any more. I'm just making a recommendation."

"I know. I appreciate that, really."

"Good. Because you know your sister. I'd hate to get on her bad side."

"Don't worry. I'm sure we can hack out our differences in a way that *doesn't* involve lightsabers."

"That's all I ask."

The flash of hyperspace suddenly reverted to a billion pinpoints of brilliant stars against a black backdrop. The view swept downward until it was filled with the magnificent swirl of Coruscant's city-light. Hundreds of skyhooks and space platforms hung in orbit and hundreds more spacecraft buzzed busily between them.

"Glad to be home?" Mara asked.

He'd never thought of Coruscant as home, not really. Home was Yavin 4, and Yavin 4 was long dead. Nonetheless, the planet below was the place where

things happened, and now more than ever he wanted to be in that place.

Jacen's time of wandering around, seeking elusive truth was over. Now he had to act, for the good of his daughter and the good of everyone.

"Yeah," he said at last. "I've got a lot of work to do."

The ship lurched forward eagerly. Endless city lights swelled before them as they fell out of the night and into the bright center of it all.

Read on for a preview of
Sword of the Jedi I: Remembrance
By Gregory O. Scott

The first volume of the trilogy that brings an epic generations in the making to its magnificent conclusion.

The galaxy is at peace for the first time in a long while, but something lurks in the shadows, threatening the fragile stability. As Jaina Solo and her husband Jagged Fel travel to an old friend's wedding, Luke Skywalker sends his son Ben and Tahiri Veila on a secret mission to his home planet of Tatooine.

But the real threat may lie elsewhere. Somewhere in the Unknown Regions of space, two mysterious fleets are clashing. A joint Imperial-Alliance expedition, led by Jagged and the veteran Wraith Squadron, is sent to investigate. What they find will shock the galaxy and threaten to restart the most devastating war in history.

Whatever the band was playing, it was terrible. A Klatootinian was blaring her jizz-horn without any apparent consideration of tonality, and her Pa'lowick partner was strumming slowly on his bass like he was in a whole different world. And then there was the drummer, a squat pudgy Squib, who flailed his hands about like an infant throwing a temper tantrum. It would have been bearable if the cantina was nicer, but it wasn't. Ugly haze clung to the ceiling. The lights were dim. The ale was lousy, or so he'd heard. The gray old Wookiee tending bar looked ready to drop at any minute. Ben Skywalker had a hard time believing this place was one of the most important locations in galactic history.

But if his father had said so, it must be true. When sending Ben off on this mission, he'd gotten a little gleam in his eye and recommended Ben visit the Mos Eisley cantina, where Luke had first met Han Solo and Chewbacca almost fifty years ago. He'd even told Ben which booth they'd met at, and recommended he'd try it out. Ben had done as requested, and was pretty sure the upholstery hadn't been changed in all that time.

Ben had been from one end of the galaxy to the other, endured horrible struggles and seen great wonders, but he was not exactly a veteran bar-hopper. His companion seemed a little more familiar with how these places operated, so for the moment he sat in the far corner of the booth, watching Tahiri Veila lean over the bar and chat with the old Wookiee. When she was finally done, the small blonde-haired woman walked back over to the table, holding a big cup of something dark and bubbly. Like Ben, she was dressed in a casual brown jumpsuit with plenty of pockets to hide her blaster and lightsaber. She sat down wordlessly next to Ben and began sipping.

Ben watched her for about a minute before saying, "Well?"

"It's really not so bad," Tahiri looked down at her drink. "You know, Tatooine's not a brewer's paradise, so they have to import this stuff. You have to cut them a little slack."

"That's not what I meant," Ben sat back and rolled his eyes.

"Oh, really?" Tahiri asked. "You don't want to try?"

"I don't think I'm allowed," Ben said.

"You think anybody in this fine establishment cares about a legal drinking age?" Tahiri stabbed a finger at the black scorch-mark scoring the plaster wall behind him. "Besides, you're almost there."

"I don't think I *want* to try," Ben said.

"Suit yourself." Tahiri shrugged and took another drink. He watched her. She put the glass down and said, "He's not here yet, so cool your heels. We'll wait and take in the atmosphere."

"Atmosphere," Ben pointed to the smoke fogging around the dim overhead lights. "Is that what that is?"

"Call it history, then," Tahiri said. "You have to admit it's pretty exciting... The end of the evil Galactic Empire began in this very booth, in this smelly cantina in a dusty town on a worthless backwater planet..."

"Okay," Ben admitted, "I guess it is pretty wizard."

"Wizard?" Tahiri cocked an eyebrow.

"Old Tatooine slang," Ben said. "At least, that's what my dad told me. He was probably making it up. Or maybe not. You tell me."

Tahiri looked down at her glass. "I couldn't really tell you. I grew up on Tatooine, but I was raised by the Tuskens, remember? I didn't exactly get to pal around with the local farmboys."

Ben had been working with Tahiri for a while now, and he knew how to read her expressions. He knew when conversation was venturing to places she didn't like to go. So he decided to change the subject. It was a piece of advice he'd gotten from many adults over the years: when

all other avenues of conversation dry up, talk about work.

"So," Ben said, "What are the odds he'll recognize us? I mean, maybe we should have, you know, put on a disguise or something."

Tahiri gave him a skeptical look. "Disguise?"

"I dunno. Give you some fake lekku. I'll shave my head, stick on some Zabrak horns. Or at least we could dye our hair. Red and gold stand out a little, y'know."

"Relax, Ben." Tahiri looked out at the crowd. "Traygo doesn't even know we're on to him."

"Maybe. But the guy spent a full day on Korriban. There's no telling who he found, or what."

"You're the one who explored the old Sith tombs a couple years back," she reminded him. "You didn't find anybody then."

"No. Not then." He fought a scowl. At the time, he, Luke, and Jaina had been with Vestara Khai. Vestara, who had by that time already wormed her way into his heart, almost convincing him that she was ready to give up her Sith heritage and walk the path of a Jedi. And Ben, young and lovestruck, had been perfectly willing to believe everything she said, including the stuff about there not being any Sith on Korriban.

"So, anyplace else you want to go on Tatooine?" Tahiri said abruptly. Maybe she had heard the same advice.

"Anyplace else? You mean, like sightsee?"

"Yeah. Did your dad tell you any more haunts to check out?" she gave him a sly smile. "Don't you wanna see where he hung out when he was your age?"

"According to my dad, he used to hang out at Tosche station and fool around with landspeeders and T-47s. He said he'd thought it was really boring at the time, that Tatooine was the furthest place from all the excitement in the universe. But then he shook his head and said how much he missed it nowadays."

"I can image," Tahiri said thoughtfully. "Your father is the last of the old Jedi and the first of the new. All the responsibility he has, all the things he's been through... If I were him, I'd want to hop in my old landspeeder and race

through Beggar's Canyon too.”

“Well,” Ben asked a little cautiously, “Is there any place *you* want to see?”

She didn't give the please-don't-ask look, thankfully. Instead she stared up at the ceiling, thinking. She said, “I didn't live on Tatooine nearly as long as your father. Master Skywalker got to be a normal teenager, which is something neither of us ever did. I ended up on Yavin 4 when I was barely ten years old. I remember things, obviously. But when I thought of Tatooine I'd think of...”

When she trailed off, Ben added, “Sand under your feet?”

She laughed a little. For a long time she'd preferred to go around barefoot, but recently she'd started wearing boots again.

“Sand under my feet. Yeah, there's that.”

“Doesn't it get hot?” Ben asked.

“Only if you walk on it during the day, which is a dumb thing to do,” she said. “But it's not just sand under my feet. The Dune Sea is... amazing, really. It really is just an ocean of sand, and in the daylight the entire thing glows so bright, and when the sun starts to set all these little shadows appear at the crest of every dune, and they stretch and stretch as the sun goes down until the entire landscape turns to shadow.”

As she spoke a smile came to her face: Soft, calm, nostalgic. He rarely saw her like that. He said, “That sounds nice.”

“You bet it is,” Tahiri agreed. “I always hated Coruscant. Yavin was nice, because there was so much nature, but Coruscant, and all those Core Worlds... No. Not for me.”

“Well, once we wrap this up, we can take a tour of the Dune Sea,” Ben said.

“Maybe,” Tahiri leaned forward again. “That'll depend on what Mister Traygo has to tell us.”

“Assuming he has anything at all,” Ben said. “For all we know, he really may have just been a random treasure-hunter.”

"Doesn't fit his profile," Tahiri shook her head. "He does odd jobs, but always on contract. We're lucky we were able to track him this far."

"Even more lucky he likes this place as a watering-hole." Ben said. "What are the odds, right?"

"It's a small planet, Ben."

"Yeah, but this one cantina over all the ones in Mos Eisley, or Mos Espa, or Bestine..."

"Hmm. You're right. Must be the Force at work."

"You serious?" The idea made Ben a little anxious.

Tahiri shrugged and took another drink. Her glass was about half-empty now and Ben, forcing himself to be honest, was just a little, teensy bit curious what they ale was like, and he knew she'd let him try some if he asked. Despite being almost twice his age, Tahiri treated him like an adult, even moreso than his cousins. That Ben had played a critical part in bringing Tahiri back from the Dark Side may have been related, but not something either of them were in the habit of dwelling on. Every partnership had certain no-go zones both parties agreed to respect.

"Look alive," Tahiri said in a hushed voice. "We've got incoming."

Ben didn't look around, didn't sit up straight, didn't show any signs of alertness at all. His Galactic Alliance Guard training had been useful in some ways. He knew how to not look suspicious. So he slumped back in his seat and played with the cuffs on his sleeves, glancing up now and then to see Therman Traygo walk up to the bar and order a drink.

Traygo was an Aqualish dressed in a red flight suit, so he was easy to keep an eye on. He spent a good five minutes chatting with the Wookiee bartender, who did a very good job of *not* looking at their booth, as Tahiri had surely instructed.

"Well," Ben said while staring at his sleeves, "What now?"

"We wait," Tahiri said, head angled down at her drink while she watched Traygo from the corner of her eyes.

"We don't want to make a scene in the bar. Once he leaves, we'll follow."

"Sounds good to me," Ben said. "Hopefully he doesn't stay forever."

"Hopefully he stays just long enough to get a little drunk," Tahiri said. "He'll be easier to handle that way."

"Hopefully," repeated Ben, but just as soon as he said so Traygo stepped away from the bar, checked his chrono, and headed for the exit. He hadn't even bought a drink.

"Sithspit, that was fast," Tahiri said, getting to her feet.

Ben rose too, more slowly than her. They made their way for the exit casually, looping around tables and people so as not to draw attention to themselves. As they walked Ben saw Tahiri throw a glare at the Wookiee bartender, who responded with a lanky shrug.

The sun was starting to set over Mos Eisley, and while the sky was still aglow long shadows were filling the city's streets and alleys. It was lucky for them that Traygo was wearing a bright red jumpsuit. They stayed on his tail, following him down the main drag running from the cantina to the old crashed starship-turned-casino his father had told him about. The streets were full of Jawas and humans and every kind of alien in between, but Traygo's red jumpsuit, combined with his hulking Aqualish height, made him an easy target.

It was, therefore, easy to notice when he abruptly disappeared. Ben and Tahiri, staggered slightly apart in the crowd, began squeezing their way forward. When they got to the point where Traygo had slipped from view they found a narrow alley between two sand-colored building-sides, barely wide enough for Traygo to have snuck through. There was no other place for him to have gone, of course, so Ben plunged in first, Tahiri right behind him. The crowd on the street didn't seem to notice.

The alley seemed to swallow up all light, but Ben plunged forward, daring to reach out with the Force for Traygo's presence. There was no indication that the petty crook and sometimes-courier was Force-sensitive, but when dealing with potential Sith allies it never hurt to

guard your presence. So Ben reached out lightly, and felt a presence further down the alley, around the nearest corner. No, not one presence, two. He abruptly stopped in his tracks and looked back at Tahiri, who nodded. She'd felt it too. She flicked a hand up, two fingers pointed to the sky. Ben nodded, reached out with the Force to give him a boost, and propelled himself up over the building-side, onto the roof.

He crouched low as he scampered over the rooftop, from one edge to the next. When the narrow alley turned a corner it opened up into a slightly larger one, where two people had enough room to face each other with space to spare. Ben circled around to the far end, where the wide alley split into two narrow ones branching off in opposite directions. He crouched low over the rim of the building and tentatively peeked his head over the edge. Traygo was there, facing a humanoid wearing a brown vest over a dark-green shirt and khaki trousers. He, or she, seemed to have a short-brimmed animal-skin cap pulled over a head of shaggy brown hair. When Ben looked closer, he saw a pair of dark goggles pulled over the being's eyes, whatever that meant. They were talking with Traygo in hushed tones. The Aqualish seemed to be gesticulating while the other being stood with arms crossed, barely moving.

Ben reached out with the Force again and felt Tahiri waiting at the far corner. He weighed his options carefully, as he'd been taught by his late GAG mentor Lon Shevu. Charge in now and you'll probably catch them by surprise, but you'll lose the chance to observe. Wait and observe, and something unexpected might happen to change the situation and cost you your advantage.

Maybe Ben was getting cocky, but he thought it better to wait. Whoever Traygo was meeting, they might have been a Sith agent too. He wondered if he and Tahiri should split up, one shadowing Traygo and the other shadowing this new arrival, but if either party had back-up, it would leave the solo Jedi outnumbered and at risk. The choice was a heavy responsibility, and Ben rolled

different options back and forth in his head, trying to guess which one would lead to the best outcome. The Force, alas, wasn't being very helpful.

He watched them and debated with himself for maybe two minutes, though it felt longer. He was jerked out of his reverie when Traygo took something out of his vest: a slim silver data-rod. The other being- Ben was pretty sure they were human, and probably female- took the rod, looked it over, then pulled a small personal datapad out of her vest. She slid the rod into the pad and its flat-screen viewer buzzed to life. From his distance Ben couldn't make out much, but it seemed like text and numbers were running on the screen. Then the woman flipped off the screen and stuffed both pad and data-rod into her vest. She reached into another pocket and drew out something else. A small card, probably containing stored credits or access to a bank account. The trans-action was almost over, and Ben was faced with sudden decision: jump them now, while they were still focused on whatever deal was going down, or wait a little longer to see if anything else passed between them.

He made the decision fast. He sent a signal to Tahiri through the Force, simple and clear: *Now!*

They appeared at the same time, at opposite mouths of the alley: she popping around the corner, he dropping down from above. They both ignited their lightsabers and held them high, as much for warning as defense.

"Halt!" Tahiri called. "Put your hands on your heads! Now!"

Traygo looked bewildered, but didn't raise his hands. One hand however over the blaster pistol slung at his hip. The woman held her hands away from her body, but not up in the air. She looked back and forth between Ben and Traygo. The black goggles hid her eyes and parts of her face, but she looked little older than Ben. For a second she almost looked like Vestara Khai.

The thought shocked Ben. She wasn't Vestara, she couldn't be. Her hair was chopped short. She didn't carry herself like Vestara. And her face was too wide, her chin

a little too prominent, her left cheek a little too pocked. No, the stranger wasn't Vestara, the Sith girl who had wooed him and tricked him and shattered his heart, but she *could* have been, and that was enough to make Ben drop his guard.

In one swift motion, the girl spun, plucking a blaster pistol from the inside of her vest. She raised it and fired, not at Ben or Tahiri, but at Traygo standing right in front of her.

The shot hit him dead in the forehead. He didn't even register surprise before dropping.

Ben lurched forward, Tahiri too. The girl pulled something else from her vest and threw it to the ground. Suddenly the alley was filled with light and heat. A stabbing pain shot through Ben's temples, dropping him to the floor. He heard nothing, felt nothing over the pain, not even the Force.

It was gone as quickly as it had come. Suddenly the shadow-dark alley returned: Ben and Tahiri, on their knees, clutching their heads. A small scorch mark on the ground. And Traygo lying face-up and dead, black eyes dimly reflecting the sunset glare overhead.

"I missed it!" Ben grimaced. "I missed her! I let her--"

"Get over it, Ben!" Tahiri scowled, rising to her feet. She lunged forward and picked Ben off the ground as well. She gave him a sharp slap in the face and said, "Where did she go? Can you feel her? I can't feel her!"

Ben looked at the three exits from the alley and reached out with the Force, trying to find some indication of their quarry. He reached out farther, beyond the walls, into the buildings, the rooftops, the other streets.

Then he found her. He saw her for just a second in his mind's eye, slipping into the crowd on the main thoroughfare, heading for the spaceport.

"Come on," Ben took Tahiri by the shoulder. "I've got her."

